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Customer service in France : an American perspective

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CUSTOMER SERVICE IN FRANCE:

AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the existence of a customer service ethic or practices of customer service in France. The possible manifestations of customer service are viewed from an American perspective. The American customer service ethic is explained, followed by some of the ways in which France may fail or succeed in customer service. The possibility of an exportation of American customer service mores into France is examined with suggestions for implementation, followed by a look at France's own unique service. Finally, limitations of America's customer service practices are revealed and the impact of the two cultures working together is considered.

Research on this subject reveals that French culture is not predisposed to a strong customer service ethic, but that the country's business people are willing to employ some of the aspects of American-style customer service. The thesis also endeavors to provide some of the cultural and psychological background for the findings.

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PREFACE

One of the business world's more commonly heard buzzwords these days is "customer service." Some businesses claim to excel at it, some actually do, and yet others are repudiated by customers for not possessing it. Customer service, it seems, is an intimate part of business in the United States and the world of the American consumer.

Because Americans identify so readily with the concept of customer service (Remember the slogan "The customer is king"?), it seems only natural to us that companies strive to deliver it in order to attract and maintain customers. We expect good service and we're generally appalled when we don't get it. What impact does our mindset have on how we view business dealings in other cultures?

To explore and consider this question in some depth, I decided to do a cross-cultural study about customer service between the country obsessed with it, the United States, and the country with the worst reputation for it, France. The French do well in the international business arena. So, if their concept of service is so horrible, how do they manage? Do Americans trying to do business in France suffer from the two cultures' differing views on how to treat customers?

The answers to these and many other questions about customer service in France are discussed in this paper. This thesis first endeavors to discover how customer service is viewed in the United States. Once our own views are uncovered, the French reputation for bad service is examined and some of their "successes" and "failures" from the American standpoint are explained. The thesis then looks into what Americans doing

business on French soil can expect, followed by the future of the American ideal of customer service in France. To conclude the paper, forms of true French customer service are revealed, a humbling look at America's service flaws is reviewed and the lessons to be learned are considered.

This paper is an examination of two cultures' views of something the business world revolves around: customers. How the French tackle the concept of customer relations differs from American methods and beliefs. This thesis aims to both uncover and explain these differences. May those who read it come away with a better understanding and deeper respect of each culture's way of dealing with the consumer.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Customer Service in the United States

The notion of customer service in the United States is very popular among consumers and is on the minds of almost every organization. American consumers are familiar with phrases such as "The customer is always right," and titles like "King Customer."[1] Consumers have minimal service expectations, including that each organization, at the very least, have nice employees whose aim is to try to make the customer happy.[2] Companies are also well-aware of America's service ethic. Everybody in the United States preaches customer service; all sorts of companies claim to be "customer-driven."[3] Organizations claim the supremacy of their customers in mission statements, annual reports, posters, seminars, and even television shows.[4] CEO's rage about customer service in important meetings in an effort to convince everyone they believe in it. For them, it's a priority, a mission statement, a target, a goal.[5] The customer service ethic in this country is pervasive. By and large, consumers expect service and organizations try to provide it.

There are basic customer service truths that Americans tend to believe. "The Ten Commandments of Good Business" listed by customer service author Cottle aptly expresses the beliefs many companies try to instill in their employees and captures what most customers would like to think businesses adhere to.[6] The following are the most significant from this list:

- Customers are the most important people in any business--in person, by mail, or by telephone.

- Customers are not dependent on us; we are dependent on them.

- Customers do us a favor when they call; we are not doing them a favor by serving them.

- Customers are not cold statistics; they are flesh-and-blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own.

- Customers are not people to argue or match wits with. Nobody ever won an argument with a customer.

- Customers are people who bring us their wants; it is our job to fill those wants profitably to them and to us.

- Customers are the life blood of this and every business.

- Customers are deserving of the most courteous and attentive treatment we can give them.

Due to a common knowledge of "commandments" such as those shown above, most Americans share fundamental beliefs that the customer is entitled to certain behavior on the organization's behalf such as "the most courteous and attentive treatment."

Companies also recognize that certain comportment toward customers is required. A training manual dating from 1898 lists some of the basics of appropriate employee behavior toward the customer. Even a century ago the writers of this manual understood these rudimentary service rules: "Don't be discourteous to customers...Don't stand in a listless manner while customers are examining goods...Don't say 'I was not hired to do that.'"[7] How employees behave is crucial because much customer service is provided in

person between employees and customers.[8] Customer service means looking after customers--viewing them as individuals and attempting to understand their needs.[9] Some companies may use their own hypotheses about what customers want, but more and more they are trying to understand what goes on in their customers' minds in order to bring greater value to their customers.[10]

One may wonder what motivates an organization to embrace these principles of service which seem to cater to or "spoil" the customer. Business writers who concern themselves with customer service often mention profit and competitive advantage as two important motives. Customer service is performed in an effort to make a profit or reach a related business objective.[11] One of the "commandments" of good service also references profit: "Customers are people who bring us their wants; it is our job to fill those wants *profitably* [italics mine] to them and to us."[12] Considering clients' needs and preferences and providing quality is imperative for it provides a "competitive opportunity,"[13] as described by Cottle. In one customer service book, it is explained how increased competition in the marketplace and greater customer savvy affect the need for impressive customer service. The authors point out that customers are more demanding because they are more sophisticated, requiring better service to deal with services and products of increasing complexity. Due to global competition, loyalty is often low and alternatives are plentiful. Higher service demands are also due to the increased wealth and education of consumers. The huge baby-boom generation now has significant spending power. Therefore, their service expectations rise, they can afford to be selective, and they will

have their needs met by a competitor if necessary. One may note that companies see customer service as a tool to out-perform their competitors in the mind of the consumer. The design of the service or product and its role in competition is also stressed. Davidow and Uttal specify, "Products and services that have not been designed from the ground up to permit easy, effective maintenance and repair destroy a company's ability to satisfy customers at a reasonable price."[14] Companies whose leaders have chosen to apply the notions of customer service to every aspect of their businesses preach the need to center entirely on customers' needs when designing products and even in making arrangements with suppliers. All decisions and all actions are to be customer-based to better serve the customer and surpass the competition's performance.[15] Companies recognize that pleasing the customer is not only expected in the marketplace, it is also an accepted means of pursuing profitability and competitive advantage.

Why organizations and consumers alike embrace the rather demanding American service ethic can be examined on a psychological level. In the United States, there is the belief that the success of the relationship between the service provider and the customer depends on the provider entirely. One may wonder how this attitude came to be. A look at the cultural background involved is insightful. Perhaps the Victorian traditions stemming from America's shared Anglo-Saxon culture play a role in expectations. A quote by David Maister printed in the context of the need for professionals to focus on clients aids in explaining this American belief:

> The marriage between a client and [a professional] is not, alas, an equal, modern, enlightened one. Rather, it should be compared to a Victorian marriage in which one party (the client) expects to be catered to in exchange for providing the means of support of the other party (in this case, the professional service firm).
>
> The client, like the stereotypical Victorian husband, has sought out a partner who is expected to be loyal, faithful, supportive and caring. And, above all, accommodating. The responsibility for the success of the relationship...falls almost entirely to the wife. In the client-[professional] marriage, no matter who is at fault, restoring peace and harmony in the wake of a conflict is the [professional's] problem.[16]

One can see that childhood teachings also prepare Americans collectively to make certain assumptions about how service should be rendered. Americans are taught that it is important to feel that others like them. The French cultural anthropologist Raymonde Carroll points out that American children are taught from an early age to make relationships with those outside of the family, to "make friends," and seek a status of popularity among one's peers.[17] This ingrained desire to be well-liked may also explain why Americans expect service providers to be so friendly and accommodating, perhaps in an effort to make the customer feel popular and likable. A supporting statement to this view was made in 1993 by an American reporter charged with rating the service in Europe: "It was a pleasant surprise to see America to be so recognized in [the service] industry. Service, wherever provided in the world or by what kind of company or business, is a function of attitude, *a genuine liking for people* [italics mine], an understanding that you treat people as you would be treated yourself."[18] The customer service practices espoused in the United States are supported by and may have their bases in cultural tradition.

While customer service expectations are high, attempts to meet those expectations are often misguided, due to a lack of sincerity or little desire to put the customer first. In the United States, customer service can mean artificial cheerfulness as is evidenced by bouncy waitpersons twittering on about how great the food is while they proclaim their pleasure of serving.[19] This silly, over-the-top "Hi-my-name-is-Mandy chirpiness" scoffed at by Fromm and Schlesinger is considered too insincere to be genuine customer service.[20] One recognizes that organizations often dedicate themselves superficially to service. Well-meaning and disingenuous managers alike respond to the call for customer service by creating clever slogans, declaring their new commitment to service, and teaching their front-line employees about the importance of smiling.[21] The result is a feeling on the customer's behalf that the service providers are simply "going through the motions" of customer service. A focus on technical conformity can be substituted for service by some businesses. Many professionals have focused on providing products or services whose main aim is to meet technical standards. This is a defensive strategy designed to protect the consumer and the provider from legal liability, but it does not lead the professional to pursue the client's needs.[22] A customer may be left with a product that has no defects, but still does not do what he wanted it to. Sometimes firms try to convince the customer through image rather than action that they are customer service-oriented. Service author McKenna points out that this practice was prevalent during the late 1970s and the early 1980s when entrepreneurs and venture capitalists focused on bringing a proliferation of new technology and products to the marketplace. Companies directed their marketing

efforts toward gaining recognition in the marketplace rather than providing customers with a total solution. Reputations were built from images designed on Madison Avenue, and perception often out-distanced reality. The author believes that may be why service is synonymous with repair in the personal computer industry.[23] This occurs today; one may notice that customer service is highlighted in a company's advertising, but the actual service rendered does not meet the customer's standards or those claims made in the company's ads. Although the customer service ethic is strong in the United States, its reputation is not always lived up to.

How do Americans behave when their expectations are not met? This is worth considering for lack of customer service is a part of the business world also. Customers may feel that noteworthy or superior service is often the exception rather than the norm.[24] Generally, people just do not complain to the organizations who do not provide it well. Davidow and Uttal claim that complaints at headquarters represent only 2 to 4 percent of all unhappy customers.[25] A representative of Walker Customer Satisfaction Measurements of Indianapolis stated that "Complaints do not track customer satisfaction very well. Research shows that complainers are an unrepresentative set of your customers....Most customers tend to suffer in silence."[26] This presents two dangers to the organization: 1) the customer remembers a bad service experience, whereas an adequate one may be taken for granted or not even noted,[27] and 2) a company which does not make a favorable first impression on a customer may not get the chance to try again or will have to do outstandingly well to make up for the first bad experience.[28] Due to the

strong service ethic in the United States, customers are offended by bad service but they are not likely to inform a company of its poor performance. The author of this paper believes that customers do not make the effort to report bad service because they feel it is the company's responsibility to do it right the first time, they can express their disapproval by shopping a competitor, or they are too jaded or fed up with bad service to bother.

Who in the United States is concerned about providing good customer service? One would be tempted to think that only industries whose primary focus is the ultimate consumer need to pursue it. Actually, all categories of organizations concentrate on the customer, be it a business, professional practice, hospital, or government agency.[29] The following are all "customers;" they all receive services provided by an organization: clients, guests, patients, passengers, students, employees, and taxpayers.[30] Because the concept of good customer service need not be applied to only the end-user consumer, it is often internalized; companies stress the importance of treating employees as customers. The importance of "internal customer service," or the ability of one department to meet another department's needs, does not go unnoticed. Many companies believe that in order to have satisfied customers, one must first have satisfied employees.[31] According to a report by the Economic Intelligence Unit, the rise of "customer sovereignty" stipulates that employees ought to be seen as customers of the company as well as workers and that the company would be wise to use the same marketing principles on the inside as it does on the outside.[32] Attitudes about customer service are pervasive and extend beyond the ultimate consumer; the principles are often applied to the relationships within the firm.

Emphasis on the customer is increasing in the United States. Although the consumerist movement, personified by Ralph Nader, began in the 1960s,[33] the consumer's heyday continues today with the concepts of customer service and customer satisfaction. One may note that interest in the customer has grown markedly and is seen as a means of getting ahead in the marketplace. Business writers Glen and Albrecht proclaim, respectively: "'Service' is the hottest subject in business right now,"[34] we have entered a "new era of customer value,"[35]. Donnelly stresses that the 1990s have been declared the "Decade of the Customer" by some of the country's leading business publications.[36] There is a belief that the need for customer service is surpassing a previous need for quality in American business. Authors Mackay, Sheridan, and Albrecht, respectively, are pointing out that customer service is increasing in importance in the business world: "More and more, managers in individual organizations are zeroing in on customers, and [they are successful],"[37] "in many companies, managers' bonuses now depend on customer-satisfaction scores,"[38] and "Companies all over the world are experiencing this fundamental...shift to customer value."[39] One may conclude that as companies gain control over the quality of their products, emphasis will be turned toward the customer's experience with the product or service.

There seems to be a belief among service and quality business people who share their thoughts in writing that this new era of the customer will profoundly change business practices. The most notable changes predicted are a complete focus on customer satisfaction, highly-developed customer relationships, a shift in marketing practices to

meeting customer needs, and the marketing function present in every department of the organization.

Some business writers are promoting total concentration on the customer, stating that the company should make *all* decisions based on an overriding desire to serve the customer better.[40] The popular theory of total quality management which is employed for changing company behavior and actions for the long term has been linked to customer service. Business writers Hogg and Mazur state, "The main method of achieving [total quality management] is to ensure that the driving force of a company is customer satisfaction."[41] Albrecht predicts a radical change in management thinking which includes a new emphasis on "total service" where each employee's work either creates or adds value for the customer or for the service provider.[42] These business writers believe that every individual member of an organization should begin to sincerely view his or her job in relation to serving the customer.

Superior customer relations has been cited as essential for business survival. It is advised in one book that a manager has three options: 1) hire people with greatly advanced customer relations skills, 2) hire people who can be trained to have those highly developed skills, or 3) do without them. The author then notes that in order to survive, a company must select one of the first two options.[43] How the customer perceives the quality of service can have an important impact on market share, affect one's freedom to set prices, or influence the profit margin.[44] Sheridan stresses that to be competitive, an organization must not only keep the customer happy, but also attract, retain, and enhance

customer relationships, increasing the company's "market-perceived relative quality."[45] Creating a strong relationship with the customer will help the company keep customers and increase their competitive position. Given the strong customer service ethic in the United States, one is not surprised to find businesspeople and writers making such intense predictions about the future role of customer service.

The advocates of customer service claim that marketing is taking on new roles. Service author McKenna claims that whereas marketing used to be about manipulating customers' minds, it is now coming to mean serving customers' needs.[46] The image-making of Madison Avenue is giving way to concerted efforts to discover and meet customers' needs. A successful businessman sold on customer service shared with his readers that the study of marketing and consumer behavior used to follow an assumption that the market was filled with naive, unintelligent buyers who would buy what producers offered, given that the advertising and promotion were done properly.[47] McKenna states, "Marketing today...is neither to fool the customer nor to falsify the company's image. It is to integrate the customer into the design of the product and to design a systematic process for interaction that will create substance in the relationship."[48] Marketing is expected to make customer needs and expectations an integral part of the organization. Although these downcasting views of traditional marketing may not be held by everyone, one may find their presence in the business world to be an indication of the penetrating reach of the customer service ethic.

The popularity of the customer service leads some to believe that marketing is an essential part of every aspect of the organization, not just an isolated department. One author considered it erroneous that companies have viewed marketing as a separate function, apart from product development, manufacturing, finance, and sales.[49] Discontinuing the practice of a distinct marketing department has been proposed, as is cited in a publication by the Economic Intelligence Unit: "Getting rid of the marketing department is not quite so radical as it sounds. The assumption that marketing is what happens in a marketing department can be dangerous because in a competitive world marketing has to be about what happens everywhere in an organization."[50] Many business writers have concluded that marketing and service have evolved and are the new emphases of business.

The concept of customer service is well-integrated into the world of business in the United States. For some Americans, it may mean friendly workers with glued-on smiles, for others it could represent a whole new way of perceiving business, marrying marketing and service. Certainly, customer service is a familiar notion to every American. In its most basic and generalized form, it connotes that the consumer is entitled to special treatment by an organization's employees and that every business should endeavor to attract customers by satisfying their expectations.

American View of the French

In the United States, the French do not enjoy a reputation of being friendly, kind, helpful, or warm. One of the first adjectives that comes to mind when discussing French temperament is "rude." In fact, a foray into the LEXIS/NEXIS database (known best for making almost any newspaper article available to the subscriber) found that a search for articles with the words "French" or "France" and "customer service" only brought forth a small handful of articles. On the other hand, a search containing the words "Paris" and "rude" brought up well over one hundred stories! To American ears, the words "French customer service" constitutes an oxymoron. Given the poor reputation the French have in the United States for being unfriendly and cold, one is not surprised that they are also regarded to be highly unlikely to be able to deliver what Americans call good customer service.

It appears that not only do most Americans consider the French to be rude, but they also do not hesitate to spread this opinion in books, magazines, and newspapers. After the completion of a 1993 *Travel & Leisure* reader fax poll, the authors informed their readers: "Fax Poll warned you not to say France, but did you listen? *Mais non.* More than a quarter of you said the Gauls have a lot of gall..." In response to the question "Which country that you've visited has the rudest people?" 26% of the readers responded "France," followed by Germany with a meager 9%. In response to the question "What's the friendliest country you've visited?", France received only 4%.[51] Reporters invoke the image of the rude Frenchman often. One states, "It's easy to be frustrated by stereotypes

in Paris....Yes, Parisians can be rude."[52] Another points out that Americans fear that the French do not care much for them and concludes with the thought "the French simply are rude to outsiders."[53] Yet another reporter felt inclined to share with her readers a story about some Parisian tourists who jeered at Princess Diana in Egypt because they were inconvenienced by the streets being blocked for the royal procession. The writer was alarmed that "they might be starting to export the legendary rudeness they normally reserve for visitors and each other chez eux."[54] Apparently, this negative reputation has reached non-U.S. shores as well. In a London *Times* article, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, Germans and Japanese all condemned the French for being "hostile," "rude," "not helpful," and "cruel."[55] The image of the rude Frenchman exists in many Americans' minds and it is reinforced by stereotypes and their frequent references in printed material.

The reputation the French have of being impolite and cold, especially toward foreigners, is at times synonymous with "French." For example: "All the Frenchman I'd known had always been so full of themselves, so disdainful of Americans, so...*French* [italics mine]."[56] Platt, an American author living in Paris, stated: "I've heard Britons and Americans proclaim two things in a sort of hiss: 'France is okay - but the *French!* [italics mine]."[57] In *Time* magazine a quote categorized as the "unlikely national self-assessment of the week" surfaced about France. The French were caught not only recognizing the bad reputation, but also admitting it. A senior French official explaining a misunderstanding between American diplomats and French communications stated: "We

were trying to be modest, we were trying to be nice, to be un-French for a change."[58] The image of the rude, arrogant Frenchman is not only pervasive, but it has reached a level of notoriety among the non-French and even the French themselves.

The negative regard American culture has for the French disposition is reflected in many Americans' determination that the French are not suitable for customer service. It is this belief held by Americans that made this paper worth researching. A customer service-oriented American familiar with the negative stereotypes about the French may be curious about them and the fact that businesspeople in France are considered averse to providing good service. Business writer Ketchum gives the example that employees at the French branch of an American company have to be instructed that it is not acceptable to argue with customers. He adds, "Making the special effort that results in quality, 'value-added' service does not come naturally to the French."[59] A newspaper article with the headline "Service Is a Lost Art" tells the reader: "Americans heading to Europe as part of the summer travel avalanche shouldn't expect Old World charm when it comes to personal service....The French, with some exceptions...do not believe in service."[60] The French language, which is rich in vocabulary, does not have a term for the concept "customer service."[61] Another article donning the title "Service with a Smile - If You're Lucky" warns of the results of reviews filed by reporters for the *European* regarding the service in various establishments such as restaurants, hotels and retail shops. Paris was rated only two out of four possible "smiling faces"; apparently quality service was only available to those who could pay a high price for it.[62] In comparison to the strong customer service

ethic Americans have, one may conclude that the French and French temperament are not predisposed toward giving decent customer service.

Not all information about the personalities of the French being passed on to Americans is negative, however. This heightens one's curious about French citizens' suitability for customer service. Some writers who have had the occasion to become particularly familiar with France and its inhabitants have shared their favorable opinions of the French with the American reader. They have either discovered what rules govern French behavior or have met people in France who were "nice" or "friendly" in the American sense. Perhaps the urge to pass these positive experiences on to Americans has to do with the globalization of business and tourism. The writers are helping the American people to understand the French so that business transactions and tourist activities go more smoothly.

There is a belief among some Americans who are fond of France and its culture that the negative perceptions are completely false. Polly Platt, an American who has raised a family in Paris, conducts seminars for British and American expatriates to teach them about French culture in order to help them adjust to a new life there. She is sympathetic to French-style comportment and states in her book *French or Foe*:

> In Paris, when I meet newly arrived Americans from smaller towns who, speaking no French, complain about the rudeness and aggressiveness of Parisians, I can only laugh....I am convinced that its inhabitants are no more or less sullen than their counterparts in any of the world's great metropolitan centers. To single out Parisians as particularly disagreeable or unpleasant is nothing less than a bum rap.[63]

A reporter gives his opinion of Parisians: "The people of Paris, I've been told, were extremely rude, ill-mannered and conceited....I don't know what Paris they were talking about...but as far as I'm concerned, you couldn't ask for nicer folks than the French....I find the people [in Paris] to be friendly, outgoing and accommodating."[64] Another reporter lets his readers know that he also believes that the French, although considered to be irritable and cold, "are burdened by one of the worst bum raps in history."[65] The American reader who encounters statements such as these is left wondering if the awful conception of the French in the United States is, at least for some, wrong.

Other than denouncing altogether the bad reputation of the French, some authors choose to point out the different atmosphere found outside of the cities, especially Paris. The author of *Culture Shock! France: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette* points out that although most international employees must know the Paris region, Paris is also the most complicated part of French life. She then emphasizes that the countryside is home to people who are notably friendly and relaxed, thus softening the image of the rude Frenchman.[66] Sympathetic travel writers also extol the benevolent personalities of the residents of the countryside. One such author states, "Maybe you've heard the myth that...all the French are rude. Don't believe it." He recalls that the folks he met in the French country were "gentle, friendly people who seemed quietly aware of their good fortune to live in such a land."[67] A contributing writer of French origin implores her readers to reconsider the stereotype of the American-hating French. She urges Americans to make their judgments of the French after they have traveled through the country and

met its welcoming and friendly inhabitants.[68] These writers who wish to spread the image of a gentler, friendlier France are aware of the negative stereotypes surrounding the French. Their writings have a certain urgency as they attempt to persuade Americans to accept a different, more favorable opinion of France's citizens. Therefore, one may entertain the thought that the French may harbor some welcoming and friendly behaviors that would strike an American as service-oriented.

As Americans attempt to learn more about French mannerisms, they also try to educate their fellow Americans about the French. Rather than simply proclaim that some nice French people do exist, they interpret the seemingly odd behavior of the Frenchman. The book *Culture Shock!* contained an illuminating, albeit sardonic, quote by international journalist Stephen O'Shea regarding the Parisian pastime of insulting others:

> Foreigners put out by this behavior lack sophistication, for they have not realized that showing discourtesy is a Parisian way of paying a compliment. They know nothing of Paris' *code incivil*, the Gallic equivalent of Miss Manners, and its golden rule: the ruder you are to people, the greater value you give to their existence.[69]

The author adds that the French save their "genuine warmth and humor" for friends and family. The cool reserve they show in public is actually a way of protecting their privacy.[70] The ever-friendly American who is quick to show agreement with his companion would find the French habit of being critical to be offensive. Criticism is defended in this book as an innocent means of giving one's point of view. The author suggests that it is quite acceptable in France, a normal way to air one's opinion which is not intended to be insulting.[71] By explaining French behavior, some hope to lead

Americans to a deeper and more forgiving understanding of the stereotypes surrounding the French.

While the illuminations of and tips about French behavior being published are helpful, the American may find himself confronted with several views of the French: 1) the stereotypes that the French are rude and unfriendly are completely false, 2) only the people in France's countryside are nice and friendly, or 3) French behavior is misunderstood and must be interpreted for Americans. All three views are valid for each person who presents them to the American people. Attempts may be made at changing Americans' perceptions of the French. Because negative commentary on French behavior greatly exceeds its explanations, it is difficult to override one's doubts that the French are capable of providing good customer service to their own compatriots or even to Americans.

Purpose of Studying Customer Service in France

The subject of customer service in France is, for an American, fascinating in its own right. American beliefs about French inhabitants lead to the conclusion that the French are simply not suited to providing their customers any decent amount of service. But, the study of customer service in France as viewed by Americans carries more importance than that of an interesting intercultural study. At a time of ever-increasing global competition and interaction, customer service for the American could be a competitive tool as well as a facet of American business mores to be exported. Also,

business people in France and the United States have substantial interest in each others' countries for purposes of new markets, overseas branch offices, and acquisitions. Understanding how a deeply-manifested notion such as customer service is viewed in a foreign host country is vital for the American company that deals with the French and/or operates in France.

Today, customer service is about much more that just a smiley employee. It embodies pleasing and satisfying the customer, creating customer loyalty, bringing the goods and services to market the customer wants, and making an organization run smoothly and efficiently. Therefore, one can see why business writers such as Davidow and Uttal stress the importance of customer service in terms of competition: "Customer service...is a potent competitive weapon in *every* business." The authors of that precise statement followed up by pointing out that service leaders invariably dominate their industries, in terms of sales growth and profitability.[72] Regis McKenna, who devised "relationship marketing," cites intense global competition as one of the reasons the customer should become a more intimate, driving force behind every business.[73] Karl Albrecht who advises that the customer should be at the center of every business reports that companies all around the world are undergoing a fundamental shift in thinking which focuses on customer value.[74] Excellence in customer service is considered by many business leaders to be an effective tool in global competition.

The French and Americans share a significant amount of business dealings. Speaking to this is the fact that 23% of foreign investment in France is American.[75] The

U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that in 1992 there was $23.25 billion worth of U.S. direct investment in France.[76] The fourth highest ranking country from which France imports is the United States, preceded by Germany, Italy and Belgium.[77] In 1994 France had $16.8 billion in exports to the United States and $13.6 billion in imports from Americans. Between 1987 and 1993, U.S. exports to France grew an average of 9% per year. France is presently the United States' third-largest European trading partner. The U.S. Department of Commerce states that among the two countries' ten largest export product categories, they share four. Especially promising industries for Americans in France are computer software, employment services, security and safety equipment, franchising, computers and peripherals, laboratory equipment, industrial chemicals, and medical equipment.[78] Given the amount of business dealings between the two countries, one may declare that understanding each other's culture is vital, both for smooth business interactions and personal survival. The American business presence in France is sizable, with more than 1,000 American multinationals with branches. European headquarters are commonly located in Lyon, Sophia-Antipolis and especially the Paris region. The capital of France is at a central location in the emerging global village of Europe and thus has an increasing number of international managers and their families. Also, many American companies have been acquired by French companies in the last few years. Examples are Rorer acquired by Rhône-Poulenc, Pennwalt by Elf-Atochem, American Can and Triangle by Péchiney, Honeywell and Zenith by Bull, Certain Teed by Saint Gobain, Square D by

Schneider, and Equitable Life by AXA.[79] Acquisitions such as these further the need to be familiar with the culture behind French business practices.

American business people spending time in France are often surprised by the differences in the two countries' cultures, as evidenced by Platt: "Managers and executives transferred here [the Paris region] by American companies are in the same boat – [sic]surrounded by French employees and French culture....the surprises, paradoxes and contradictions of French people are not only endlessly diverting but can also be extremely disorienting when your career is on the line. Just about all of the Franco-American friction at the work place comes from distress at not recognizing what is really happening, because of expecting something else – [sic]due to one's own mental programming."[80] Americans and French simply do not realize that they are operating with distinct sets of rules governing their behavior. When American executives and their families come to Paris for an assignment, they arrive with their own beliefs about what is polite behavior. Unfortunately, they are not the same as the Parisians' beliefs.[81] Conflict occurs at such great levels that an assignment can run the risk of ending prematurely. Returning home office personnel who were on assignment abroad is costly and complicated. One source stated that when expatriates return early because they could not adapt to the new environment, their company loses from $25,000 to $125,000 in capital plus the damage of hard feelings left with clients and customers with whom they could not deal successfully.[82] Americans and their families dealing with the French must understand certain basics of French business in order to work with the French successfully. Because customer service

is a facet of business so basic and so innate to an American, this topic warrants specific study for those who deal with the French in a business context.

Finally, one must consider that unilaterally deeming the French service-averse is dangerous. If the French were to fall short in all that defines customer service for an American, then their industries and businesses would be failing. Imagine a country whose culture prevented its businesses from making customers happy, getting repeat business or offering its customers the products and services they needed. Obviously, the French must be doing a lot of things right, for this description does not sound like France. It is only American perception that forces the conclusion that the French are miserable at customer service. There is actually a lot to learn from French business practices. For example, one American observed that the French give great importance to small details that Americans may overlook. This "exacting nature" has helped to produce the world's finest perfumes, champagnes, cognacs, and high fashion.[83] Although the French do not consciously pursue service and use terms such as "customer service," they have their own culturally-specific ways of successfully offering it.

Contemplating how the French consider the notions of customer service is an intriguing study, given the image of the arrogant Frenchman so pervasive in the United States. Members of the business world may concern themselves with this issue because it is significant in terms of gaining a competitive advantage, achieving success in Franco-American business interactions, and learning about the impact of culture on the consumer in France.

CHAPTER 2

FRANCE'S CUSTOMER SERVICE "FAILURES"

How do French business practices measure up to American standards of customer service? How would the leader in customer service judge France's consideration of the customer? Attention is first given to those areas where France seems to fail to meet the expectations Americans have for certain pillars of customer service. In this chapter, these popular customer service categories will be examined: making a good first impression, providing courteous assistance, pleasantly serving in restaurants, being helpful to newcomers, encouraging employees' collaboration, and allowing firms to respond to market needs first. Often, what seems to Americans like very poor customer service is simply a different cultural philosophy followed by the French. Other times, lagging service standards really are the source of customer disappointment.

First impressions

The vast majority of American companies strive to put their "best foot forward," to make a good first impression with the customer. This is one reason front line employees are reminded constantly of the need to smile at and be polite to customers. Workers who answer telephones are expected to be courteous and have good telephone manners. However, smiling and providing service over the phone do not come naturally to the French. Employees do not concern themselves with exhibiting an initial good image

for their employer. By American standards, the French fall short of making good first impressions when the customer calls.

An American in France will have to search in vain for a long time before he is received in a store with a welcoming smile. It's not that French people do not smile at customers in an effort to be unfriendly. Rather, the French do not smile much at those they do not know. Contrary to child-rearing practices in the United States, French children are not told, "Smile at people!" Consequently, they do not grow up to be automatic smilers. If a person were to smile constantly, as in the United States, he would be considered somewhat simple-minded or mocking.[1] In fact, the happy face is the sign of an idiot in France.[2] When smiling for no reason occurs between members of the opposite sex, flirting is suspected. As in the case of a recent introduction between two people (as happens in a business context), smiling is still prohibited. The logic is: if one does not truly know the other, what is there to smile about?[3]

Smiling does not come naturally to employees who provide a service to customers. For example, the founder of the "hypermarket" Auchan in France has picked up a few American tips about service. As a result, he has resorted to asking his cashiers to do something which goes against their nature. He has devised "le 'SBAM,'" for *sourire, bonjour, au revoir, merci*, (smile, hello, good-bye, thank you). This cutesy acronym is intended to remind his French workers to be pleasant.[4] At Euro Disneyland, the executives have not only asked their French staff to smile, but have succeeded. While it is a welcomed surprise to Americans visiting the park, the employees themselves feel

awkward about it. One staff member quoted in the *National Review* explained, "The foreigners are used to being smiled at, but the French do not understand it. They think they are being taken for idiots."[5] Books commenting on the lack of smiles foreigners have noted while in France claim that the French do not intend any personal injury when they do not smile at customers. Rather, the custom of reserving smiles mainly for friends and family members is said to be a part of the culture understood by both the service provider and the French consumer.

This habit of not smiling is unnerving to Americans who have to deal with the French. Platt, an authority on the interpersonal aspect of French-American business relationships, finds that "nothing separates Americans and French people more than their smile codes. No French ways freeze Americans in Paris more, nothing reinforces the 'rude arrogant cold' Frenchman label more."[6] Platt suggests that Americans need only understand the reasons behind the French "funeral expression."[7] For the French, an overly eager, smiley appearance is fake, whereas a cool, elusive look is considered real.[8] The French smile when they have a reason to, they do not go around with a smile frozen on their faces.[9] When they do not smile, they are not being unfriendly, but genuine. Although a cold welcome may be normal to French customers, Americans would find this flagrant violation of customer service rules unforgivable.

Service over the telephone is not of high quality in France. The person who answers the phone views the caller as an intruder, and gives the impression that he is being inconvenienced by the call. The caller is then at the mercy of this person and is made to

feel pressured into hurrying with his questions and hangs up quickly. Most French people prefer to go to the agency or office rather than telephone because they are not confident in the information given or transactions made over the phone. The French have learned that no one takes personal responsibility for a response over the phone.[10] Secretaries and receptionists often startle American business people calling on someone in France with their curt manner and demanding inquiries.[11] The French do not use the telephone as a tool to make a favorable impression on potential and actual customers.

Some of the brief, unhelpful treatment callers receive is due to how they are perceived. One who comes to an office and waits in line is not only respecting the person in charge, he is also behaving fairly, waiting his "turn." A person calling in is "butting in line" and complicating things for the person who answers the phone. Thus, the brusque treatment.[12]

The telephone has a somewhat threatening connotation in France. The phone call has been described as being worse than somebody showing up unannounced and knocking at the door. Given this menacing undertone, some people use the telephone only when they want to complain.[13] The receptionist may have to hear out the angry tirade of an unsatisfied customer who has called to "tell them [the company] what I think of them."[14] The employee who is responsible for answering the phone may then be wary and rather indifferent to the caller. While this behavior may be understood by the French, it is not appreciated by them and would even insult the American who does not know the cultural background to poor telephone manners in France.

Companies in the United States ponder ways to compel their employees to deliver enthusiastic, friendly service, all in the name of good customer service. They feel it is extremely important to make a good first impression with potential and returning customers. Due to cultural differences in personal comportment, the French are unable to greet customers with wide grins and exuberance. Because the telephone is not yet considered a valid means of business communication in France, service over the phone also does not meet American standards, and even frustrates the French themselves.

Clerks' attitudes

In the United States, personnel assisting a customer are expected to be friendly, courteous, helpful, and even accommodating. The American customer service ethic is accepted by all, consumers and management alike. Slogans like "The customer is always right" do not exist in France. The treatment of customers by both retail and government clerks bares no resemblance to the behavior Americans have come to expect. Judged by an American, France would "fail" in this customer service category.

Shopping is not the same experience in France as it is in the United States. The department store is one institution in France which has a particularly bad reputation for service. The author Polly Platt feels that the big stores' idea of customer service is best described as "disservice." For example, she has found that clerks seem to take pleasure in telling the customer that the store does not have what that person is searching for.[15] In shops, returning merchandise is highly unacceptable, regarded by merchants, in a sardonic

sense, as a terrorist act by customers. Accounts are told in the United States of the customer's money being refunded scornfully, accompanied by a lecture. Also, the clerk has considerable power; he alone will handle the items the customer would like to see and decide if the customer may inspect it. The customer is almost made to feel that in shops the rule is: "you touch it, you buy it."[16] The customer is not catered to while out shopping; this treatment would be unforgivable by American standards.

One may wonder why those working in shops put so little effort into their jobs and behave so contrarily. Clerks may have sour attitudes due to two reasons in particular. First, in France respect is much more important than money. Selling clearly involves money which carries the stigma of being loathsome and indecent. Therefore, selling is a profession held in very low esteem in France. Salespeople suffer from disrespect. Second, the strict social system in France offers minimal social mobility.[17] A lowly shopgirl does not indulge in the belief that she is as good as or has as much potential as a person of a higher station in life. Clerks are thus likely to spread their unhappiness to their customers.[18] In the United States, selling is a respectable occupation which has lead to many a successful career. One would not suspect that rude treatment by clerks is due to lack of self-esteem.

Government employees can be as unhelpful as retail clerks, even worse. It is difficult to get tasks accomplished involving the complex French bureaucracy which unnerves even the French. The civil servants upon whom one counts for assistance are in low-status jobs which breed feelings of inferiority.[19] While they are well-trained and

competent, they are poorly paid and subject to a rigid, demoralizing office hierarchy. The government employee may make up for his unsatisfying position with power games, which decrease the possibility of a person receiving decent service.[20] In addition, the government clerks have little incentive to provide adequate help or to be productive; seldom are quotas assigned and job performance is almost never a basis for dismissal.[21] People seeking the services of civil servants are subject to their moods and lack of motivation. While civil servants in the United States also have bad reputations for service, the customer still possesses the feeling that he is entitled to decent treatment and the service provider knows the customer service "rules" as well.

French employees in a position of giving information to customers especially do not meet American expectations of helpfulness. As the French anthropologist Raymonde Carroll reports, French people themselves are not totally confident in them, "they're often wrong," they "will say anything to get rid of you," or they "don't like to be bothered." The service providers will not offer extra information pertinent to the customer's questions, either. Information must be uncovered through a series of questions about alternatives proposed by the customer, for the service provider does not want to waste his time giving out superfluous information.[22] The typical power play and nastiness of an information agent was exemplified by a quote in a reader poll about the rudest nations. At a train station information desk, a foreigner politely asked the agent if he spoke English. The reply: "When I feel like it."[23] Again, these people may feel trapped in a low-status job and, therefore, they readily show their lack of job satisfaction to their customers. One

may recall the advice often given to employees in the United States regarding not bringing one's personal problems to work. American service providers are expected to treat the customer well, regardless of the employee's mood.

In France, the work place has traditionally existed to provide employment, not service. At the place of employment, there is also a high degree of loyalty between the employer and his employees. A director will stand behind his employee--whom he knows and has built a relationship with--not the customer who is a stranger and, perhaps, irrelevant.[24] France is not a country where management espouses notions of customer "rights." Also, like the civil servants, French employees are customarily "unfireable," so the employee's job is not at stake if he is rude to a customer.[25] The employee is more valuable because the employer has endeavored to associate with this person for the long term, whereas customers are fleeting, "a dime a dozen."

Clerks in France are not expected to feel gratitude toward the customer because he has made jobs possible by spending his money in a particular place. In stores, shops, post offices and banks, the customer is separated from the employee - he becomes the enemy, "Them." The Parisians in these jobs are extremely sensitive and can lose their temper at any moment, therefore customers must learn how to handle these surly employees. The customer is forced into slowly, carefully "wooing" the employee in order to get the service he needs. If the customer has not mastered these tactics of "seducing" the service worker, the bad treatment given the customer can be rather harsh.[26] It is up to the customer to

make sure an interaction will go smoothly and end productively. An American being forced into such behavior would balk at such unheard-of requirements.

However, coaxing clerks and employees of all kinds into providing service is standard in France. One American living in Paris who has mastered this skill calls it "Persistent Personal Operating."[27] When dealing with civil servants, it is commonly known as the System D.[28] Both forms involve showing respect to the service provider, building your relationship with him, explaining your exceptional need for help, and showing one's wit and sincerity.[29] Although useful in all interactions, the technique of winning over the employee is particularly necessary when dealing with people the customer probably will not see again, such as hotel, theater or railroad agents. The customer must first ingratiate himself and recognize that he is at the mercy of the agent. Then he must get the agent on his side, transforming himself from "Them" to "Us." The French appreciate wit and personality in a person, so pleas for assistance must be charming, funny, and genuine. Then the employee may provide the service needed by the customer or even bend the rules to grant a special request.[30] Showing deference to the service provider and using charm in order to receive good service is a normal part of business transactions in France.

Dependable, good service is always available to long-term, valued customers. To receive decent service at the supermarket, pharmacy, bank, bakery, etc., one must become a familiar, regular customer. This involves what seems like game playing to the American as one compliments the baker and his goods, for example. Introductions are required,

along with some friendly chatting relating to the business at hand only. It takes lots of patience, carefully planned conversations, and months or years to become a welcome, valued customer.[31] Once there, the customer is virtually assured the good service he was hoping for.

The customer is not held in high esteem in France. Productively carrying out tasks in the market, bakery, post office and bank requires strategic behavior on the part of the customer. The customer must prove to the employee that he is a worthwhile, important individual. This may seem like unacceptable game playing to an American, but to the French it is the expected way for two people to interact in a proper, humane manner. This method of getting service in France demonstrates that business interactions there are highly personal, at times almost resembling the customer relationship building promoted by some customer service advocates in the United States. While the American consumer would appreciate the benefits of a strong relationship with a provider, he does not expect to have to submit to such games and rigid rules to enter into one.

Waiters' behavior

Restaurant servers in the United States both know intuitively and are taught by their managers that the customer comes first. Whatever the customer asks for, the waiter will strive to accomplish. Service expectations are especially high in restaurants, perhaps because Americans dine out so often and waiters' tips depend on the kind of service rendered. Again, both the consumer and the employee agree on one thing: good

customer service is imperative. However, the French dining experience is completely different. The customer finds himself once again at the mercy of his service provider. The fact that cuisine is a serious and highly-respected art form in France does not compel Americans to understand haughty waiters. Disappointment in waiters' behavior is unforgiven and the image of the rude French waiter is spread further in the United States. When considering in what areas the French might fail in customer service, the service in restaurants is foremost on Americans' minds.

The attitudes and treatment of customers by waiters puzzle Americans. French waiters' reputations precede them; they receive much "bad press" in the United States as the stories of rude waiters abound. They have been known to refuse to serve what a customer has ordered or insult the customer's selection.[32] It has been said that some unsuspecting patron's sloppy habits could so upset a restaurant establishment as to be sufficient reason to ask him to leave.[33] Americans seem to unanimously agree that waiters in France are that country's biggest disgrace.

Dining in a restaurant in France calls for the same relationship-building methods as shopping. Taylor informs her readers that a "subtle development of interpersonal relations" is required: courteous and proper introductory comments, requests for the waiter's professional advice on what to order, and showing interest in the cuisine.[34] This may take some perseverance on the customer's behalf, but the waiter can usually be "won over," and impelled to provide good service.[35]

Particularly in good restaurants, French waiters consider themselves to be talented professionals. One newspaper reporter found the expert attitude of waiters in France preferable to the eager waitpersons of North America: "French waiters are neither smarmy, nor...superior. They don't introduce themselves as 'Gaston, your server this evening.' But they also don't sneer. They treat you as equals in a polite, professional relationship." He then suggests that those who want to maintain the customer-is-king relationship should bring along their own servants.[36] If a customer genuinely demonstrates his need for the waiter's attention and assistance, he should receive it. The waiter takes great pride in his chef and what the chef has carefully chosen to offer his customers. Waiters therefore expect a patron's appreciation, but American-style enthusiasm and frequent, empty smiles will not be doled out; that would constitute groveling.[37] Also, the waiter's behavior is more frank because his tips are not dependent upon the service he provides; gratuities are included in the bill in France. The important role of waiter is taken seriously in France and waiters accord themselves the appropriate ego. One must note that in the United States the waiter's role is one of server, not expert of the chef's cooking. The American customer would be turned off by a waitperson who demonstrated such levels of self-importance.

The image of the rude waiter stands out in the American mind for two reasons. As tourists, Americans may encounter especially negative treatment because of their inability to communicate with the waiter. The server becomes frustrated at not being able to do his job properly and do honor to the cuisine and fine establishment he represents as he feels is

necessary. It is noteworthy that no incidents of the French being unhappy with their waiters surfaced in the research for this paper. The French customer expects to defer to the expert waiter while the American expects to be catered to. Simply, the expectations of service in a restaurant differ greatly between French and American culture.

Treatment of tourists and foreigners

The American customer service ethic is rather consistent. In the United States where the customer is called king, all customers are entitled to the royal treatment, including tourists and foreigners. If they are paying for a good or service, they are a customer. Customer service principles dictate that they are therefore as deserving of the best treatment as anyone else. Americans have not been able to find evidence of any similar logic in France, however. Especially on trips or work assignments to Paris and its vicinity, people are often disappointed and demoralized by the treatment of tourists and foreigners.

In the United States, the French are often cited as being self-centered and hostile to foreigners. American reporters speak of "anti-Americanism."[38] and haughty French who do not care to share the glories of France with even the big-spending tourists.[39] One particularly severe view is offered by Luigi Barzini, author of *The Europeans*. He is particularly unforgiving of how the French treat foreigners. He believes their unwelcoming ways stem from a self-proclaimed French superiority which many Americans abhor:

> Surely this urge to set themselves up as the universal paragon, to consider all foreign things and people good or bad according to their resemblance to and admiration for French models, often helped the French to achieve perfection or, at times, a great and unique distinction in many fields....But [France's] effort to force the world to acknowledge its supreme excellence in all things at all times, its determination to ignore or fend off all foreign influences have often made its relations with foreigners sticky. They have almost always had to apologize for not being French, remember how touchy the French are on many subjects, and humor and flatter them in order to get anywhere with them.[40]

American tourists and international employees in particular are injured by perceptions of French superiority and ill-will toward foreigners.

Visitors to France complain of feeling rather awkward in France. They catch glimpses of raised eyebrows caused by their inappropriate behavior. They dread the next French sniff, shrug, or sneer they will encounter.[41] Not understanding why the French seem to harbor this "amused contempt of foreigners,"[42] they are often left with unpleasant and even painful experiences which lead to feelings of rejection or being disapproved of, criticized, or scorned.[43] While this judgmental behavior is deemed unacceptable by American customer service morés, considering the background for its existence is interesting. The French may be making constant judgments of the visitor's behavior due to their own upbringing. They themselves were endlessly nagged about proper conduct, right into adulthood, by their parents.[44] It is quite natural then, for the French to take on a parental role when dealing with bumbling tourists and foreigners. By taking interest in and "correcting" the person, they fulfill their sense of adult responsibility.[45] While Americans find the French to be judgmental and critical of newcomers, the French may believe they are simply instructing the foreigners on correct behavior. The writer of this paper

observes that American service providers are more likely to politely ignore a foreign customer's inappropriate behavior in order to help him save face and therefore consider his experience with the company a favorable one. This is in stark contrast to the French system.

Tourists and foreigners in France, being in a new place, understandably seek assistance often in their attempts to get around. Countless interactions with strangers take place as one makes purchases or asks for help, and some negative, unforgettable experiences do occur. Stories of these confrontations between American customer and French worker usually make their way back to the United States and add to the image of the rude Frenchman. Various publications such as *Travel & Leisure* and *National Geographic Traveler* do their part by printing articles which mention or highlight stories of shocking behavior encountered by American tourists.[46] The author of *Culture Shock* explains that the tourist or foreigner may unwittingly put the service provider on the defensive. Because he does not speak the visitor's language, non-French inquiries put him in a position of losing face. Rather than try to put the foreigner at ease, the employee becomes frustrated and a defensive, surly attitude results.[47] The visitor in France is bewildered by how often he is received with a hostile attitude by those who, according to his American frame of reference, are supposed to provide friendly service.

A very common complaint about French workers in the service industry is their disinclination to assist the foreigner by using their own English skills. Apparently, although the French may study English in school, they are not necessarily prepared to

assist tourists in English and meet their foreign service expectations. In a country where speaking well is a mark of distinction, the French may be especially ashamed of their clumsy, school-age English skills.[48] Due to the high value placed on articulate and eloquent speech, the French would rather conceal their knowledge of English than risk making mistakes or speaking in an unrefined manner. Some France "experts" rise to the defense of their French acquaintances and chide Americans for arriving in France without having picked up, at the very least, some phrases in their hosts' native tongue.[49] One reporter stated, "[The tourist] should not presume to address anyone in a language that's foreign to them, except out of desperation."[50] Perhaps surprisingly, a few meager French words uttered may get the tourist a long way toward better treatment. While the French are very proud of their own command of their eloquent language, some authors commenting on French culture claim that the French readily forgive foreigners for their French mistakes and truly appreciate the effort they've made.[51] In other cases, visitors to France have often returned reporting unpleasant treatment even while using their French skills. Foreigners are encouraged to at least attempt to communicate in French and also learn to employ the relationship building methods French service providers consider normal.[52] The worker expects to be given his due. In his eyes, he is doing the visitor a favor by helping him, putting his own self-esteem at risk. He will become uncooperative if made to feel that serving "is his job."[53] Tourists and French workers often clash over the service provider's reluctance to offer his own knowledge of English to assist the foreign customer.

One aspect of French culture which reaches all households in every corner of France is *honneur*, or honor. Collectively, the French possess great personal honor, the honor of their country, and the honor of their family and friends. A foreigner in the Paris region on an overseas assignment may have trouble accomplishing tasks and meeting his own business objectives. He will find he is an outsider and thus is not accorded any of the favorable behavior associated with the strong notions of honor in France. As the author of *French or Foe?* explains it, "There's no rule [about] honor, implicit or explicit, that says they have to sell or do any kind of business with you, an unknown foreigner, much less accommodate your outlandish requests."[54] French pride and honor do dictate, however, that the French do not like to be known for rudeness and impatience toward foreigners. Attempts are being made to reverse that image. In 1992 it was reported that the Tourism Office in Paris was planning to launch a campaign of welcome and politeness. Posters urging the inhabitants of Paris to be helpful to foreigners were to be hung in the summer. The Tourism Office employees even armed themselves with image-defying statements such as "Twenty million tourists come to Paris each year...and only about 100 complain."[55] The pervasive notion of honor in France can both exclude foreigners and compel the French to give them greater consideration.

Various aspects of French culture can alienate tourists and foreigners spending time in France and participating as consumers in that country's economy. Americans in particular are surprised, hurt, and even shocked by the treatment they receive there as they

try to travel, work, and enjoy France. By American standards, French service providers are denying their visiting customers the courteous and helpful attention they deserve.

Internal Customer Service

Another area in which Americans would judge the French to be failing in customer service is the practice of internal customer service. In the United States, many organizations have adopted the theory of internal service which dictates that management treat its employees with the same careful consideration usually reserved for customers and clients. Also, the concept advises that conscientious, attentive service provided by different departments of a company to each other would result in satisfied employees, leading to greater efficiency, productivity and ability to meet the customer's needs.[56] Internal customer service means working together cooperatively to the benefit of the customer and, consequently, the company.

In France, certain business customs prohibit internal customer service as Americans view it. Open communication, cooperation among individuals, and employee initiative are not common among French workers, employees, managers, and directors. A rigid hierarchy, information retention, and the absence of employee responsibility and team effort characterize the French business place. These traits hinder the ability to serve and support each other in order to provide better services and goods for the customer.

Although the work place is changing, a rigid hierarchy is traditionally the standard structure found at French companies. In many companies, the hierarchy is still tightly

controlled and the free exchange of ideas across the various levels is unheard of. This discourages employees from sharing ideas about problems affecting clients or improvements in the organization that might benefit the customer.[57]

Employees are not allowed to seek the advice or collaboration of other employees in distant levels, horizontally or vertically, while executing their business duties. Each manager is very possessive of his power and behaves as much like the autocratic CEO at the top as possible, thereby appearing more authoritative and autocratic.[58] This does not allow for open and honest discussions between a superior and his personnel. Mistrust characterizes the relationship between the levels of the hierarchy and hinders any efforts to establish open communication. Employees harbor fear and contempt of authority figures while workers are often considered "lazy, devious and untrustworthy," reports Johnson.[59] The hierarchies also suppress employee initiative. Organizations with particularly severe hierarchies such as industrial, financial and governmental institutions reward employees based on proof of superior schooling or background as opposed to a record of success and experience in one's post.[60] Rather than encourage or recognize the efforts of an insightful employee who wished to increase the company's responsiveness to the customer, employee acknowledgment is given to those employees with impressive educational backgrounds. The strict hierarchy discourages open communication and the exchange of ideas.

The hierarchy directly prohibits the introduction of the customer service concept to the French employee. Persuading the French worker that his job is about satisfying the

customer, not just pleasing his superior would be a near-impossible task due in part to the power play at each level of hierarchy.[61] Control over one's subordinates' actions takes on greater importance than meeting customer needs. The authority at each level is no more likely to relinquish any power to the customer than he is to admit that he simply carries out decisions made by his superiors.

In the United States, each individual employee is encouraged to make contributions and suggestions to various superiors or other departments for the benefit of the company. The rigid hierarchical structure common in France has prohibited such employee behavior from developing.

Americans seem to accept the belief that coworkers should be supportive and cooperative and share information in order to improve how the organization runs and increase efficiency. Requests for information are accepted and readily granted. On the other hand, the French guard information and keep it to themselves. They have their own private networks upon which they rely for gathering information. They constantly update themselves so that they do not need to ask others to "fill them in."[62] as is normal practice for Americans. The French do not view information as a common tool to be shared by all members of the organization.

Although information is a form of power everywhere, it takes on an exalted status in France. Employees can be rather secretive about their valuable information stores. In one documented case, bank managers were reluctant to give information they had about their clients to a potentially useful, expensive centralized databank.[63] The databank could

only offer out-dated, irrelevant information and therefore served no purpose. Richard Hill, author of *We Europeans*, as quoted in *French or Foe?* refers to the French system of withholding information as "management by information retention."[64] French bosses do not share specialized information with their subordinates. As a result, major problems can arise because personnel are not informed about important aspects of business operations.[65] Because information has such value to the French, they are much less likely to openly share it, even in the name of company improvement. One may conclude that not sharing information about products and customer needs hinders the French organization's ability to provide internal customer service.

French employees are not granted a great deal of responsibility. The workers take comfort in their highly-defined, narrow positions. It has been stated that the work place exists in France to provide employment, not service,[66] although this is not always the case. Employees prefer to keep to themselves, secure in their "protective cocoons."[67] Allowing employees to withdraw to their specific job tasks decreases problem recognition and initiative in problem solving.

While managers are not likely to offer their employees greater responsibility, the staff members are not craving it either. One French manager explained it like this: "French people live their present intensely, without thinking ahead too much....Our system here is very hierarchical, not made for people taking responsibility. They don't want to, either--or they wouldn't accept the system as it is." The manager is in a position of having to keep checking up on his employees' progress and reminding them to complete certain

tasks.[68] In this manner, the employee is able to take on a degree of anonymity; he has less responsibility and is not held as accountable as his American counterparts.[69] It is not expected that employees would think and act outside of their narrow job descriptions.[70] They prefer to not "give themselves" to the company, reserving the full extent of their individuality for their loved ones. Johnson states that a job with rigid parameters and duties spelt out in detail renders the employee "blissfully *déresponsabilisé*"[71] and not likely to show much initiative. Therefore, one may conclude that the company is not taking advantage of the potentially valuable insight of employees who are more familiar with the actual customer and may therefore have significant input to share with others.

The changing landscape of business in France may be adding to this apparent employee apathy. Traditionally, a large proportion of the work force in France has been employed in small business where the employee had a personal interest in quality and a job well done. Employment in large, impersonal businesses does not encourage the continuation of taking pride in one's work.[72] French individuality and too many congestive layers of management may cause the employee to disassociate himself from his employer and seek to silently complete his duties with little involvement in the company. The aversion to responsibility common in the French work place decreases the individual employee's interest in internal customer service. Apathy results in an employee who is not personally motivated to provide the best service possible to one's coworkers, superiors, or customers. In contrast to French sentiment, employees in the United States take pride in

and are rewarded for helping to make improvements for the customer's and thus the company's benefit.

The various departments and functions of the company are dependent upon one another for the accomplishment of their individual objectives. In the United States, a popular way of encouraging the cooperation of employees and related departments is developing team work. In France, the rigid hierarchy, guarding information and personal interests inhibit team efforts.

Team work, consensus, and open-door policies are all means of benefiting from the collaboration of employees in many parts of the world. In France, the interaction of employees and the resulting productive relationships at all levels of the company is not accepted as an all-important tenet of people management as in the United States. An American manager in France advised that managers on assignment there will have to "unlearn people management methods and to re-learn new ones...and to set aside any hope of creating a team effort."[73] Gerard Mulliez, founder of a successful chain of "hypermarkets," complains of the French inclination to turn inward, and not share one's ideas. He recognizes the overwhelming urge of the employee to keep to himself, but nonetheless encourages French managers to foster open communication and interaction among coworkers wherever possible.[74] Working together toward common goals is not characteristic of French working styles, whereas teamwork is an essential part of internal customer service in the United States.

Unlike the trend in business practices in the United States, French companies do not seem likely to embrace the notion of internal customer service for two main reasons. First, the concept of internal customer service grew out of the extreme popularity and acceptance of the American customer service ideal. The business community in France does not currently entertain a notion of customer service as is standard in the United States. Second, the structure of the office and the individualistic working styles found in France do not lend themselves to the open communication, cooperation, and coworker collaboration characteristic of internal customer service espoused by Americans. As judged by Americans, the French are acutely unsuccessful at internal customer service.

State Industries

A final example of how America's notion of customer service does not fit in with business reality in France is the management of some of the country's state industries. Politically-backed decisions made at some of France's state firms have maimed the companies and severely interfered with their ability to serve customers and bring to market the products they want.

Industries accustomed to government involvement run the risk of becoming unresponsive to the market and therefore making products that do not allow the firms to be competitive. France's computer firms are a prime example. The companies have been hit especially hard by the economic slowdown of the early 1990s. The severe degree of

hardship is due in part to dependence on easy government contracts, protectionism and subsidies. The French government has been accused of deterring its high-tech companies from competing intensely in the private sector because it nursed them with indulgent state orders.[75] For instance, the computer firms have been slow to respond to the market demand for open systems because they were relying on government contracts which nurtured the firms' own exclusive products. Landis Gabel, a professor at France's highly respected business school INSEAD, pointed out that the companies cannot continue to concentrate on equipment and software for their proprietary machines while pursuing success in open systems because "the customers won't trust the firms...[and] developing open systems is expensive--they can't split their resources."[76] If they are to succeed, France's computer firms must be allowed to answer to the demands of the market place.

Compagnie des Machines Bull, known simply as Bull, is a common example of a state-controlled firm which has had weak products. In 1992, only one-third of Bull's product line ran on standard architecture, offering compatibility with other firms' equipment or software for its customers. The remainder of the product line ran on proprietary architectures. Thus, as stated in *Forbes*, "Customers are understandably hesitant to invest in such relatively isolated systems."[77] In another example of Bull's unresponsiveness to the market, the company made its customers endure a long delay for a RISC (reduced instruction set computing)-based server. The chairman and CEO of Bull himself acknowledged the negative impact on the market: "[There was a] difficult time during which we had no clear message for our customers about our RISC strategy."

Bull's complacency in product development has cost it its autonomy as a leader in computers; it has had to make deals with Hewlett-Packard and IBM to survive.[78]

It has been suggested that French and other European computer firms with similar problems make alliances with foreign firms, trading knowledge of local markets for the foreigners' technologies. If not, the author of an article in *The Economist* warned that the firms will "continue to deny reasonably priced, up-to-date information technology to companies in every European industry."[79] Some state-run companies are discovering that relying on government contracts may have cost them their competitiveness in the private sector.

Competitiveness is also severely compromised by the French government's irresistible urge to meddle in the management of state firms. One case which received a lot of press was the government's insistence on repeatedly bailing out unprofitable state computer firm Bull. A writer for *Forbes* stated that management's efforts were designed to make politicians look good, not to help Bull concentrate on customers. Even the government-recruited head of Bull, Francis Lorentz, stated that customers are wary of political interference in the firm's decisions.[80] Another victim of state meddling is the state-owned bank Crédit Lyonnais. *The Economist* claimed that the downfall of the profitless bank was blamed on collusion between management and the state owner. Its former politically appointed boss was set on turning Crédit Lyonnais into the French equivalent of Germany's Deutsche Bank, allowing the bank to take great risks that the state encouraged but did not support financially. The government was slow to notice the

problems. The chairman of the commission of inquiry examining the bank's problems said the state's effectiveness as shareholder of the bank was close to zero.[81] The government has proven that it is not an effective manager of many of the firms it insists on tampering with. One can see that the result, as related to customer service, is companies which are kept from making decisions based on the needs of their customers.

Business writers declare that the political interference often stems from French governmental pride. In 1992, the prime minister Edith Cresson announced highly controversial plans to form a new state conglomerate to include nuclear, semiconductor and consumer-electronics firms. The plan's aim was to produce a French equivalent of Germany's Siemens and Japan's Toshiba and also save ailing business units of state-run Thomson from an American or Japanese partner.[82] This push to turn the unprofitable aspects of Thomson into a world leading industrial and make a name for France was a prime example of French politicians' tendencies to be controlling and overly ambitious. Even children have been slighted by political meddling in business decisions. When the government decided to supply schools with computers in the 1980s, the contract was awarded to the politically favored French consumer electronics firm Thomson. A few years later, the firm dropped out of the computer market, leaving the schools with outdated machines that could not be upgraded.[83] The French government is guilty of using business to wage its political objectives. And, one might add, at the expense of customers.

As the abuses and failing condition of government-controlled firms became known, answers were suggested. In 1993, plans for proposed privatizations were underway to supposedly end the abuse of state firms by politicians. Political meddling remained, however. The same year, the government was caught controlling the appointment of the boss of France's biggest company, Elf Aquitaine.[84] The former chairman was dismissed for inappropriate alliance with the wrong political party. *The Economist* pointed out that even into 1994 the political parties were still replacing bosses of state firms with political allies and that the firms basically serve as employment agencies for public servants. The recent difficulties of both Bull and Air France were also blamed on the "misguided industrial policy" of the politically appointed managers.[85] The fact that the French government may still be slow to change its ways was also mentioned in *Newsweek* in 1994. It was reported that the prime minister, mindful of an upcoming presidential election, was superficially handling industry ills with "generous injections of government money." The state's gross waste of money on failing industries and ministers who cater to special interests were partly to blame for a noticeable French anxiety and loss of confidence.[86] The French recognize that the governmental interference must be stopped, but the state appears to be unable to resist intervening in state firms' decision-making and using top management appointments for its own political jockeying.

There have been pleas, both in France and abroad, for the French government to stop meddling in its state firms' affairs and force the companies to fend for themselves in the marketplace as the private sector companies do. Many, such as authors contributing

to *Forbes, the Economist*, and *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, believe that allowing the companies to concentrate on their non-governmental customers would increase their competitiveness and therefore performance.[87]

In 1993, many state companies in France were privatized or earmarked for future sale. This came in response to free-market fervor, a governmental need to finance budget deficits and demands by the European Commissions for politicians to stop interfering in industry.[88] Those who witnessed France's constant interference in its state firms were getting fed up. A 1993 editorial in an aviation magazine condemned French government interference in and cancellation of Air France's austere recovery plan to return profitability by 1995. The meddling of the government was challenged with statements such as "an airline must be run like any other competitive enterprise, by managers not ministers," and "the only way to escape today's vicious cycle [of huge annual losses] is to give French airline managers freedom, not more political interference."[89] During the sudden governmental rescue of Air France, other European airlines balked. A Swissair official complained, "It is wrong to artificially support an airline. Market forces [only] should apply."[90] In France, strong unions as well as government have a say in the decisions companies make. As a result, apparently some Air France managers were equally disgusted with their European counterparts' business methods. After the company agreed not to lay off tens of thousands of employees, a spokesman for the company defensively reported, "We're not following the Anglo-Saxon strategy for getting profit at any price."[91] The government and its industries have come under much public criticism for their

comportment. The research for this paper uncovered that critics of the meddling would like to see French state firms given the space to respond appropriately to their customers and the market.

Although France is dealing with some of its ailing state companies with privatization, the government is still bailing out some of its biggest loss-makers. Crédit Lyonnais and Air France have both approached the state with arguments of needing subsidies. The problem is that subsidies may only delay desperately needed change at both firms. It has been suggested in *The Economist* that these companies also undergo privatization because "managers of freshly subsidized state firms have little incentive to take tough decisions, and few governments are willing to force them to do so."[92] Successful, private-sector companies such as Alcatel repudiate the government's meddling in companies' management. Another author of the same publication called the interferences "detestable," and "basic and imbecile *dirigisme.*"[93] The government is still not holding some of its firms accountable to their customers and the market.

Although many consider that French pride may force the country to hold on to certain precious state firms and allow them to continue to drown in their uncompetitiveness,[94] the firms may be waking up. The most recent Air France Chairman and Chief Executive, Christian Blanc, admitted that some changes were in order at his company. Because airlines no longer regulate fares and control their captive markets, "They must innovate, increase market reactivity and productivity." As the chairman

implements the "difficult but exciting" changes, the state firm will have to take further notice of the customer's needs.[95]

According to the American ideal, firms must be allowed to meet the needs of the marketplace. This is imperative for international and domestic competitiveness and success. The French government has ignored that even state-controlled industries have private-sector customers and thus a market place to answer to for staying in business. French politicians' habit of interfering in France's state-run firms has hampered these firms' ability to confidently offer the customer the products he wants, when he wants them.

When observing the consideration of the customer in France from an American perspective, some areas of "failure" do notably stand out. Certain tenets of American-style customer service are not present in the French business place, which is a source of conflict and misunderstanding in Franco-American business dealings. French managers and employees do not regard the customer's needs with the same fervor their American counterparts do. This paper has revealed that the French differ greatly from Americans in the following areas: company concern over first impressions, clerks' attitudes, treatment of restaurant patrons, reception of foreigners, internal customer service, and interference in a company's response to the market.

CHAPTER 3

FRANCE'S CUSTOMER SERVICE "SUCCESSES"

There are some areas in which one finds that the French would truly impress Americans with their treatment and consideration of the customer. Americans who wholeheartedly embrace the strong customer service ethic in the United States would deem the following areas French customer service "successes": food and wine, the hotel industry, technology, and innovation. In these domains, the French do not necessarily excel out of a strong desire to focus on the customer as Americans might. Rather, they are areas in which the French perform well for other reasons and the customer benefits.

Food and wine

The perceived talents of the French in the areas of food and wine are celebrated around the world. Americans who have experienced French cookery firsthand and deemed it superior enjoy sharing their enthusiasm with others. Those who have gained an appreciation for wine acknowledge France's leadership in this domain as well. Its leadership in winemaking is unmatched. Customers of French food and wine often report that they have found that their expectations in regard to the two products have been exceeded. Commentators of the two products reveal to their readers that they are more than satisfied.

There is never-ending praise and appreciation in the United States of French cooking. The food is touted as the best in the world and zealous exaggerations are the

norm. Travel writers entice their readers with images of culinary expertise. One author beckons, "Enjoy eating the world's best food and drinking its greatest wine?" and then claims that it's very difficult for the visitor to find horrible food because in France "the bad restaurants must have gone out of business centuries ago...."[1] Another declares that even in reasonably-priced establishments "Every meal is a new adventure in taste sensations...."[2] One author finds that the superb meals found in France are themselves the reason for going to France.[3] Some unfortunate countries may be losing its citizens to France because of its superior culinary talents, offers one writer. His favorite bistros tempt him and his friends to emigrate to France. For them, French cooking answers the question "Is there life after birth?"[4] It seems that few are prepared to refute "France's reputation as the culinary capital of the world."[5] Although other nations undoubtedly have their own specialties and popular dishes, in the United States French cuisine is accorded a reputation of excellence which is upheld by passionate commentators and an abundance of cooking shows featuring French chefs.

With France's impressive reputation for food so popular in the United States, one may wonder what aspects of French life made it possible for so many Americans to have pleasurable experiences with the country's cooking. Customer enjoyment of French cuisine is due in part to standardizing high quality in restaurants and especially to the French tradition of quality. Many years ago, the introduction of the Michelin guide played a role in the overall improvement of food quality and restaurants in France. It helped the country to develop superior dining experiences for its restaurant patrons and to eclipse the

offerings of other countries. This index of customer satisfaction propelled restaurants into maintaining their high standards, partly from fear of seeing their marks decrease.[6] Also, the age-old concept of French craftsmanship is reflected in food products and the pride the French take in their cooking endeavors. The tradition of quality lives on in the pursuits of their cuisine.[7] Today, it is notable that all other countries in Europe send their especially promising chefs to France to master their art.[8] The French are proud of their culinary talents and have taken strides to assure that fine dining is an aspect of French culture people can rely upon.

The French approach to food is different than that of Americans. The authors of *Interculture* feel that the French do not prepare and take in food for survival, but rather for their intense pleasure of it.[9] A meal in France is a work of art whose components and composition are given high regard as in painting. All the elements of the cuisine, the wines, the service, the decorations, and the companions sharing the meal must form a perfect arrangement.[10] The book *French or Foe?* shared an insightful quote by Richard Bernstein about the French and their love affair with food:

> The French...have surrounded food with so much commentary, learning and connoisseurship as to clothe it in the vestments of civilization itself... Cooking is viewed as a major art form: innovations are celebrated and talked about as though they were phases in the development of a style of painting or poetry... A meal at a truly great restaurant is a sort of theatre you can eat.[11]

Perhaps thoughts of the French often turn to their meals because the selection and preparation of food in France receives unparalleled care and respect.[12] In a recent television broadcast with France's highly respected celebrity Bernard Pivot, he and

France's premier chef Joël Robuchon held a serious, ten-minute in-depth discussion of the secrets of potatoes which was well-received by the French audience![13] Chelminski, in his discussion of the history of food in France, states that France is unrivaled in its devotion to the arts of the table, that no other people in the world put so much time, thought and effort into food.[14] The careful attention the French give to food has helped them to capture the favorable attention of critics and satisfy many customers.

While some of the institutions Americans regard with great seriousness are taken lightly in France, food in that nation is held in the highest esteem. Chelminski, so enraptured by French cooking, claims that abiding laws and honoring marriage vows take a back seat to matters of food. Apparently, food may be the one game in France "with the rules that count."[15] The French have consistently across time deemed delight in eating and drinking one of the more important aspects of life.[16] Each member of French society possesses a great appreciation of food and the pleasure it brings the entire culture.

While supermarkets may offer fast, one-stop shopping convenience for Americans, they are not as widely appreciated in France. Small neighborhood markets, butchers, and bakers offer French customers that which cannot be obtained in the huge, impersonal hypermarkets. For example, the world famous French bread, the *baguette*, is baked twice a day and once on Sundays so that all the French may enjoy the pleasure of freshly baked bread everyday.[17] The corner merchant knows his customers and treats them with special care and consideration, setting aside some of their favorite vegetables for them or asking about the health of a relative.[18] Fruits and vegetables on display are often hand-

selected by the merchant and his personal honor stands behind the excellent assortment he has made for his beloved customers.[19] The care and attention accorded food by the neighborhood shopkeepers contributes to the character and quality of everyday French life.[20]

Promoting food and cooking to an art form have gained France a reputation for consistently pleasing French and foreign consumers alike. One might conclude that the special treatment of matters of the table inherent to the French has enriched their culture and quality of life. Judging by the documentation in the United States applauding French food, the nation's mastery of its cuisine is an area in which the French readily satisfy themselves and their customers. Food in France would be considered a customer service success story by Americans when the great amount of effort, time, and energy the French unilaterally put into their cuisine and its resulting reputation are observed.

Like fine cooking and France, wine and France are also inseparable. Ribéreau-Gayon maintains that the country has held its reputation of the world's premier wine-producing country for centuries.[21] Consumers of wine everywhere have been impressed by France's variety of popular wines, its wine tradition, and the new wine technologies.

France enjoys a reputation as the world expert on wine and winemaking. The country produces every kind of wine and was the originator of most of them. Also, the nation partakes in more exporting and importing of wine than any other country.[22] The French produce one quarter of the world's total of wine and, not surprisingly, consume more wine per capita than any other country.[23] These statistics illustrate the significance

of wine in France and the great popularity of French wine around the globe.[24] Wine lovers from all corners of the earth find themselves drawn to France.[25]

The finer, expensive French wines are fashionable in many countries. An increase in the consumption of these wines benefits France's economy as well as its reputation. Where a glass of table wine may be common with every meal in many households throughout France, wine's role is changing. More and more, finer wines are brought out for entertaining or for special occasions. Everyday wine consumption has decreased, but the sale of more pricey bottles of wine has increased. The consumer is enjoying wine more discriminatingly.[26] One finds that French wines being used for special occasions is indicative of the customer's high regard for the product. Many societies, notably the English and the Northern Europeans, have come to appreciate a superior bottle of French wine so much that most of the great French wines are sold outside the country.[27] Consequently, one can see that the French are not too possessive of their great wines.[28] Taking advantage of new trends in wine consumption and generously exporting the more expensive bottles of wine allows France a favorable balance of trade in the agriculture and food sector.[29] France gains economically, and its foreign customers are kept satisfied by the availability of their favorite French wines.

Considering French wine's great popularity, one wonders what makes it possible. The wide variety and favored offering of French wine on the world market today is due in part to France's time-honored wine traditions. Attributes such as "gustatory genius," instinct, passion, and pride have been used by wine connoisseurs to describe what has

propelled the French toward a deep understanding of the possibilities of the grape vine, and the control of its quality. Perhaps without consciously trying to, the French have bred quality in wine over the generations. One of the hallmarks of French wine is its remarkable variety. In 2,000 years the French have maintained local traditions, reinforced by pride and secrecy, that have kept them from nationally growing the same grape varieties, using the same techniques, or holding the same ideal of good wine.[30] The result is a wide variety of wines that has allowed the French to perform well in many markets.

Laws protect French wine and enable the consumer to better discern what he is buying, given the abundance of wines available. The laws governing the production of wine donning the *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* label are the most strict in Europe and in the world. The consumer feels confident that he is buying a genuine product which meets certain required qualities.[31] Wine is one of the most vigilantly supervised products in the whole agricultural industry. There are various controls at all levels and permits are required for almost every activity regarding wine. The *appellation* concept receives much respect in France and is promoted to the customer as a guarantee of commercial honesty.[32]

Wine is part of France's heritage which is being preserved and built upon by technical advances and a scientific perspective.[33] The introduction of new equipment has helped to increase levels of quality. For instance, in the 1980s modernization was embraced by the use of the latest marketing techniques in Bordeaux.[34] Also, fervor for a superior product has even allowed smaller farmers to install stainless steel fermenting tanks and temperature control equipment, despite generations-old techniques or additional

cost.[35] Large, industrial producers of wine and independent farmers alike have accepted the changes which have contributed to furthering France's role in the world of premier wine-producer.[36] In France, the production of wine is treated like a science as well. Men and women are studying viticulture and oenology to better understand the vineyard and the winery. Research in universities is benefiting the wine makers.[37] There is also the Université du Vin which charges itself with being a center for the dissemination of wine culture in its entirety.[38] New technologies and an enthusiasm for greater knowledge about wine are supplementing the strong traditions of French wine and resulting in increased pleasure for consumers of wine. It is important to note that common knowledge of the French dedication to wine also augments its superior reputation which attracts customers.

Wine is a vital part of France's culture, economy, and national identity. That France excels in wine production is made evident by its demand around the world. French businessmen encourage the growth of the wine industry by trying to reach broader markets, improve quality, maintain the industry's charming image and meet trends through specialization.[39] These efforts all have the effect of meeting the needs of wine customers and serving them satisfactorily.

French food and wine are success stories for their customers. France's pride and respect of these domains enables the French to allege that they eclipse their competitors and set standards for others to follow. Fans of French food and wine eagerly share their enthusiasm for their favorite cuisine and drink with their audiences, as is evidenced by the vast number of publications and broadcasts dedicated to the subjects.

Hotels

One expects that many Americans would be surprised by the high customer appreciation of the hotel experience in France. Considering that French employees in any position of service are overwhelmingly reputed in the United States to be cold and rude, staying in hotels in France can be unexpectedly pleasant. This is another area where the French have a natural interest in their product and the result has been happy customers.

While the hotel industry in the United States has many unremarkable corporate hotel chains, this is not the case in France. Hotels are often run by the owners themselves, and perhaps their families. Some estates which receive overnight guests have been in the family for generations. Thus, there is a personal stake in the hotel's success which is apparent to the customer due to the care and management of the establishment.[40] Hotels are another manner in which customers find that they benefit from French pride, creativity and style. Gustafson, long-time and favorite author of guides on French hotels, finds the country's hotels to be generally charming, kept-up, and well-managed. She claims that the customer can count on a friendly staff, enchanting decors, great food, cleanliness, and convenience, or at least some combination of these customer-pleasing attributes.[41] These descriptions are said to apply equally to hotels below the luxury level as well as to those the big spenders frequent.[42] A particularly notable trait of hotels in France is their overall impression of "antique elegance" which many travelers find captivating. One soon dismisses thin walls or loose door handles[43] and may recall how utterly bland ordinary

hotel chains can be. Many customers around the world have become fans of France's hotels due to their atmospheres of authenticity and careful attention to detail.

Parisian hotels receive much business due to the popularity of Paris and its suburbs as a tourist and business traveler destination. Here, individuality is the essence of the hotel experience.[44] Most hotels in the one- to four-star range can be counted on for a memorable visit. Even in Paris where the French endure the worst reputation for arrogance and rudeness, the service in hotels is often surprisingly good. Guests find that the staff can be helpful and warm. The owners and managers who run the hotels have been described as friendly, accommodating, welcoming, knowledgeable, pleasing, professional, polite, gracious and hardworking.[45] Most seem serious about their profession and make it evident by welcoming and assisting the guests in their unique, often homey hotels.

In considering what makes the hotel experience in France so positive, one finds that part of the appeal of French hotels is the decor. The hotels are highly individual and therefore contain decors ranging from opulent and very fashionable, to eccentric "attic chic,"[46] to neutrally contemporary. The age of Parisian buildings can be a treat to guests for there are ornate, carved ceilings, English country furnishings, fine French fabrics and stately antiques. Of course the occasional creaky floor and out-dated plumbing may also be present but are readily forgiven or considered part of the charm.[47] Hotels which have not undergone recent redecorating may have dated, eccentric decorations such as orange chenille bedspreads or nicked furniture.[48] Even in these circumstances, Gustafson finds

that the customer can still count on cleanliness[49] and quaint touches like doilies and flowers in the lobby[50] or antiques in the rooms.

One may note that there is a pleasurable hotel experience awaiting any kind of traveler in the Paris region. Royalty to shoestring-traveling students can find appropriate accommodations in that popular city. Wealthy customers have been pleased by locations such as the Ritz which has 24-hour room service on Limoges china, gorgeous views and fresh flowers in the room everyday for a few hundred dollars a night.[51] Adventuresome visitors such as students, backpackers, and intellectuals appreciate the rakish no-star favorites which are aged, quirky establishments the guests romanticize.[52] The mid-range hotels in-between these two extremes are numerous. Travelers accustomed to modern conveniences will find that these respectable hotels are adding toilets to every room, and the prices are reasonable. One source made this interesting comparison: "For almost the same money you would spend at a Holiday Inn with dinner at a Sizzler or Denny's, you can stay in a quaint 16-th [sic] century hotel...and have a nice three-course dinner with wine."[53] This statement exemplifies one reason French hotels have satisfied customers. For those who do not have to concern themselves with cost, highly polished, opulent service awaits them. The expensive, luxury hotels are similar to those in big cities in the United States. Journalist Doherty reports that high quality in gorgeously decorated hotels with pleasant, professional staff is virtually guaranteed in Paris, for a price.[54] Even in the French capital, the source of many accounts of unfriendly and rude treatment, hotel customers of all kinds are reported to have had enjoyable and memorable stays.

Outside of the Paris area there are family-run estates which now welcome overnight guests. Writers are increasingly discovering the numerous hotels of this kind in France and report that these lodgings also quickly become favorite travel destinations for their enthused customers. The ornate residences in rural country settings can even be affordable; double occupancy ranges from the 70 to 100 dollar range[55] to 175 dollars or more.[56] One feels that the moderate cost of staying in these estates coupled with the rare and unique experience of staying in an aristocratic manor result in a customer-attracting endeavor. Travelers who visit these castles, mansions, and estates are impressed by classic and charming authentic decors, family atmosphere and history, excellent meals and grounds one might associate with national parks.

Described in *Town and Country* as "aristocratic French bed-and-breakfasts," these calm, statuesque estates are located on hillsides or stand behind gold-colored gates and manicured lawns. They immediately attract the traveler who wonders what life would be like in such a grand palace. Some of France's most distinguished families have chosen to share their ancestral homes with the public. They give the customer an opportunity to experience *château* living.[57] Upon arrival, visitors are usually treated to a cup of tea with the host or hostess in the formal salon[58] or perhaps at a cozy fireplace.[59] The guest rooms are then discovered to be often large and luxurious,[60] perhaps with gigantic bathrooms complete with thick towels and bathrobes. Handsomely furnished rooms may house antiques, high ceilings, and air-conditioning.[61] Guests find themselves enchanted by the exquisite interiors of the manors their hosts have chosen to share with them.

The aristocratic aplomb these sites possess could be daunting to customers not accustomed to lavish surroundings, but accounts of visits to these estates note that the guest's stay is quite relaxed. Surroundings have been reported to be cozy and welcoming, amid the ornateness. Spontaneous discussions about the family's history or purpose of taking in guests can occur over morning coffee or on the terrace before dinner.[62] In some locations, the guests are encouraged to mingle out on the veranda, over a lively dinner, or while playing billiards.[63] The guest is made to feel comfortable in his surroundings which adds to his satisfaction as a customer.

The high service level in these estates is exemplified by the authentic experiences offered to the guest at mealtime. Meals offered at the manors range from generations-old, family recipes prepared by the hostess or family chef[64] to the dishes of former top chefs of famous Parisian restaurants.[65] The customer benefits from the French attention to food. This is exemplified by the activities of one of the chefs: she takes her interested guests with her to the open-air produce markets and then conducts cooking classes upon returning.[66] As the guests expect from French cooking, the offerings are found to be delicious and add to the overall enjoyment of the visit.

Part of what makes these privately run estate hotels a customer service success is the effort the hosts make to complete their guests' stay. The visit includes use of the picturesque grounds surrounding the manor. Impressive to travel writers are the exactingly pruned gardens,[67] vineyards and vegetable fields,[68] horseback riding, rolling pastures,[69] and acres of woodlands. Services extended to the guests may also include

tennis, cycling, boating, croquet, swimming, hunting, or fishing.[70] That the vast grounds and various activities are offered to the customers enriches the experience for the guest.

By opening their homes to travelers, aristocratic French families have given many customers a firsthand taste of what life in a French country *château* is like. The result is an expansion of the favorable reputation of France's hotel industry among travelers. The businessmen of the industry in Paris also work to make the customer's visit pleasant and memorable. Because the French do not have a tangible customer service ethic as in the United States, one might presume that the effort in French hotels to satisfy the customers is a natural extension of French pride and an appreciation of fine things. These attributes appear to predispose the French to offering hotel experiences with an emphasis on the customer as they strive to set their best food forward for their guests.

Technology

France may be famous for its luxury products like perfumes and haute couture, but French technology is increasingly making the news. In some markets, one finds that France has a superior edge in technology which is pushing France to the forefront of many industries as its engineers and business leaders use their technological competence to compete globally and win customers.[71] Increasing awareness of the customer is also driving some of the astute decisions being made in French technological industries. Technology is one of France's budding customer service success stories.

By putting its technological strengths to work for the customer, French companies have brought products to the marketplace which have made France stand out. The aerospace industry is one area in which one has found that the French are receiving much attention. The French enjoy the title of global leader in aerospace due in part to a policy of modernization in production and research. High product quality was already standard in the industry which has received a boost from recently pioneered technologies such as computer-aided design and production, robotics, and microelectronics. The popularity of French aerospace technology is made evident by the fact that 60 percent of aerospace production is exported. *Aviation Week & Space Technology* recognizes that the worldwide prestigious reputation of French aerospace products is well-earned.[72] Other industries are making France's technological capabilities famous as well. The nation is considered a "power" in telecommunications with notable giant Alcatel.[73] France's high speed train, the TGV, promises to place the country at the hub of Europe's transportation system.[74] Computer software technology is making a name for itself with companies such as Cap Gemini Sogeti[75] and CGI Informatique.[76] In a closer resemblance to the customer service ethic in the United States, the successful French companies in technology are all true to the customer and to their market missions.[77]

An excellent example of concentration on the customer in French technology industries is the aerospace industry. It has combined its technological expertise with a concentration on the customer to achieve its success. A long-term commitment to product support and customer satisfaction are the new emphases of the industry. Large-

and small-sized customers alike are served, with intricate systems for meeting the special needs of the smaller clients. Because they cannot afford to keep expensive components on hand, a unique system has been devised to rapidly ship missing parts to grounded aircraft. Offices have been set up around the world to facilitate client relations and streamline both communications and procedures with suppliers.[78] Suppliers in the French Aerospace Industries Group all send representatives to product-support conferences set up by industry customers. Valuable information on customer requirements regarding standards and performance are gleaned from these meetings.[79] Some companies, such as Dassault, serve a wide variety of customers and have therefore learned to adapt technical solutions to varying specific needs. For example, the company has set up an international network of "service stations" to provide maintenance to its widely dispersed civil aircraft. Also to serve customers better, Dassault specialists can be dispatched within 24 hours of a customer's emergency call.[80] The industry is also seeking means of saving time and money in various procedures. For instance, there is an effort to standardize air-worthiness certification procedures in Europe. An aviation periodical pointed out that the time and money saved "will have important benefits for...customers."[81] Varying and continuing efforts to provide superior customer service are now an integral part of the aerospace industry. An official summed up the sentiment of much of the industry by explaining that repeat customers are satisfied customers, "Everyone is aware that efficient service to clientele is the surest guarantee of sales to come."[82] The writer of this paper finds that the

accounts of emphasis on the customer's needs in this industry demonstrate how France's technological competitiveness is based in customer service.

Total quality management, in recent years a very popular method of achieving customer satisfaction in the United States, has become a goal in the French aerospace industry. Industry members are participating in efforts to improve competition as they hail continually improved performance as the foundation for success in the international marketplace.[83] For example, major French companies partake in a unique information exchange which aids in establishing precise management and evaluation methods for various functions, and increases coordination among subcontractors. Due to the exchange, standards can be established for the industry which benefit all. The Airbus A320 aircraft symbolizes the success of total quality management in the aerospace industry. *Aviation Week & Space Technology* has deemed it one of the most reliable aircraft in the world, with a 98 percent technical reliability rating.[84] Successful products such as the A320 provide great incentive for the French aerospace companies to continue their pursuit of total quality.

In wondering what aspect of French culture predisposes the French to high competence in technology, one must take note of the education system. Rigorous French education makes France's excellence in technological endeavors possible. Mathematics is stressed in France and the scientific elite in business and industry has had ten years of demonstrating its knowledge of mathematical theories during its education. Engineers benefit from the demanding coursework preceding their careers. The success of the

Ariane satellite launcher is due in part to its superior design. Before anything was built, the engineers insured that the blueprint was precise.[85] Also, France's well-designed high-speed train, the TGV, has carried hundreds of millions of passengers with no accidents--an impressive claim for French transport.[86] The French aerospace industry is profiting from such a rigorous education system as more than 80% of the aerospace technicians must be highly skilled and qualified. The expertise of these highly trained individuals enables French companies to meet the demands of their customers and further the development of the country's technology.[87]

Competitive French companies in technology have weathered the economic slowdown of recent years, made possible in part by focusing on the customer. Cap Gemini Sogeti, a software and services "powerhouse," remained competitive by responding to customers' needs. The company offers consulting and software development as well as systems integration and facilities management to its clients. Amid the recession, Cap Gemini gathered strength with acquisitions and alliances throughout Europe, while taking in the effects of a lagging economy. Customers were trying to cut costs by decreasing the size and scope of projects commissioned in an effort to produce fast returns. Cap Gemini responded by rethinking its methods of working with customers. To better serve them, the company reacted more quickly to its customers' problems and decreased the emphasis on long-term, large projects.[88] Regarding the successful aerospace industry, it has felt the turndown more keenly but is determined to remain

competitive. Even during decreased sales and job cuts,[89] the industry continues its "driving aim" of satisfying customers.[90]

In the competitive global arena, France is proving that it can compete fiercely in the area of technology as well as the personal luxury items the country is traditionally famous for. With growing emphasis, successful French companies are looking to customer satisfaction in addition to technical advances as a means to increase their competitiveness. These companies have learned that focusing on the customer has brought favorable results.

Innovation

The French penchant for innovation is rather well-known in international circles. The authors of *Management in France* were quoted as remarking about the French, "Where America extols money, West Germany work and Great Britain blood, France has nailed its flag to the post of cleverness."[91] One commentator of the French and their business practices notes that they have a history of "admir[ing] intellectual adventure and treasur[ing] innovation."[92] Historian Barzini suggested that this history is due in part to the cultural tendency for the French to be in conflict; centuries of antagonisms and tension between varying groups may have molded French character. The author of *The Europeans* suggested this view of French genius:

> In normal times the many separations, rivalries, and conflicts possibly created the climate in which [France's] unique national genius blossomed in all its varieties, and the individual was encouraged to compete, dare, experiment, explore, sharpen his intelligence...[and] occasionally create great masterpieces....[93]

French individuality and pursuit of intelligence have accorded the French a reputation of being astutely innovative.

Some of France's innovative ideas are common aspects of the French consumer's life. Modern city living often does not allow for convenient shopping trips. Trying to make stops in several stores in crowded downtown with little or no parking was frustrating busy families. French innovation led to commercial centers on the outer edge of town where sufficient land was available to put all of the customer's shopping needs under one roof and to make parking accessible and free of charge.[94] The popular Michelin guide was invented in France. It turned out to be a marvelous idea because, for the first time, it told customers of a business' service level while motivating the hotels and restaurants to improve service and, therefore, ratings.[95] France's Minitel has received top billing as an example of French innovation. While its technological offerings are commonplace now, at the time of its conception it was deemed an innovative feat. Presently, this videotext service offers 17,000 different services. There is a current, nation-wide phone directory which is free of charge and low cost services such as grocery shopping and airplane or event reservations and ticket purchases.[96] The terminal has traditionally been provided to customers for free, but customers who wish to take advantage of a newer, faster system that can transmit photos are being asked to buy the new terminal. In any case, customers will be grateful for the new services made possible by a faster system and photograph transmission.[97] *U.S. News and World Report* claimed in 1990 that Minitel was, at the time, the world's most heavily consulted database and one

reason why France was Europe's leading computer market.[98] French consumers and, increasingly, international customers are reaping the benefits of French innovation.

Many examples of French innovation also exist in the technical arena. In review of France's latest technical accomplishments, a contributing author to *Time* concluded that "France is rushing into the 21st century with more ambition, imagination and commitment that any other nation in Europe, maybe in the world."[99] He also billed France as the "driving force" behind innovative strides in civil aviation in Europe.[100] An article in *Aviation Week & Space Technology* stated that French aircraft manufacturers owe their success to "innovative ideas and increasing emphasis on quality products." Ideas such as a maintenance company's high work areas which allow technicians to walk right up to the higher portions of the aircraft to complete their work are realized. The result is a faster set-up time for arriving aircraft and greater efficiency in maintenance,[101] significant improvements from the company's and the customer's point of view. The "electronic wizardry" at France Telecom includes the world's most digitized switching system which results in crisper connections and 17,000 miles of fiber-optic cable used for transmitting cable television and videophone signals, among other things. France is considered one of the lead players in the telecommunications market.[102] A French woman created the "Katalavox," a voice-command computer. Her innovative product incurred the interest of NASA, the University of Moscow, Japanese scientists, micro-surgeons around the world, and physically handicapped people everywhere.[103] One concludes that French innovation

at times outstandingly serves the customer and the result is much attention in publications to France's innovative ideas.

French engineers have devised Numeris, an integrated services digital network (ISDN) which is highly adaptive and capable of meeting customer needs in companies of all sizes and serving varying market segments. More than fifteen countries were already participating in the network within two years of its availability. IBM, DEC, Apple, and Hewlett-Packard have all selected France for their international ISDN development activities. Users of Numeris can use their own standard microcomputer for the service's terminal which becomes a single, multimedia, all-purpose terminal. The network offers its customers considerable cost advantages over private networks. Also, it may provide the immediate productivity gains its users want, yielding increased customer satisfaction and the growth in market share businesses seek.[104] Other recent innovations include impressive technological designs. A modular flooring system saves one full story of a building for every twenty stories built when compared to standard raised flooring. A flexible assembly line cuts costs and facilitates modification of the line for new products, an advantage for just-in-time production. A micromatrix display using hardware, not software, can cheaply correct image discontinuities, even in mass production. Finally, LCD technology may be replaced by "flat CRT" in the race for flat-panel, high-definition television.[105] These products were all highlighted to exemplify the competence of innovative French designers. Each product, one notes, also offers advantages to customers over other products.

Innovation comes seems to come naturally to the French; perhaps it is part of the national character. France's engineers appear to be inherently innovative. French innovation has been admired around the world and many believe it is the backbone of future successes in French industry. While it may not always be fostered solely for the benefit of the customer,[106] it does help the French compete by offering customers a wide range of innovative products and solutions.

American customer service ideals are demanding and cover a wide range of business activities. Within those ideals, the French do excel in several areas. In the service industries, the French cooking and wine selections offered by French chefs and the individualistic, genuine atmosphere of the hotel industry stand out. Americans accustomed to a demanding customer service ethic have been won over by dining and lodging experiences in France. As for consumer and industrial products, France has impressed commercial and end-customers alike with excellence in technology and innovative products. Technological advances in aerospace and transportation and innovative ideas in telecommunications and electronics have caught the attention of customers all around the world. From an American point of view, France is accomplishing some notable customer service feats.

CHAPTER 4

THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IN FRANCE

With the customer service ethic being so strong and widely accepted in the United States and the ever-increasing rate of international business activity, will the concepts of customer service spread to the nation of France? One wonders if the French are likely to espouse customer service concepts to attract the American market, or perhaps to imitate American business styles. As the globe shrinks and globalization continues, multinational companies will be sharing their business practices and shrewd competitors will increase their understanding of each other's secrets. What is the likelihood that the popularity of customer service concepts will appear on French soil? That question is examined in this chapter, along with consideration of how American firms operating in France can introduce their customer service notions to their French colleagues and employees.

"Customer service" - not a buzzword in France

The customer service ideals popularly espoused in the United States are not part of the natural evolution in business in France. Chapter 2, France's Customer Service "Failures," covers some of the main areas in which Americans would judge the French to be deficient in customer service notions. In this section reasons the French do not place the customer in the same all-important position Americans do are considered and further examples of lacking service are given.

One may find it difficult to imagine French managers deliberating the importance of the customer or honoring the value of his patronage in their places of business. In France, it is not management's duty to make life easier for the customer. For example, rather than taking steps to shorten long lines at the cash register, a manager might be tempted to view the long line of waiting customers as proof of the store's productivity.[1] And in large department stores, the customer is often inconvenienced by having to pay for goods in an area other than where they were selected.[2] Minor customer difficulties are not addressed and no solutions are offered. Firms and their managers also do not implement plans for improved customer service due in part to the cultural trait of avoiding any admittance of wrongdoing.[3] Customer complaints and suggestions are therefore not welcome. If a customer were to speak up, he might be accused of being abusive or having an overactive imagination.[4] It is important to note that French managers must personally bear the stigma of recognized errors. Mistakes are culturally unacceptable and admitting them involves a serious loss of face.[5] Therefore, managers are most likely to deny them and ignore the customer's claims. Not only does the manager not feel it is his responsibility to look after customers, but he may also view suggestions for improvement as an implication of poor performance on his behalf.

Employees are also unlikely to "crown the customer." Gérard Mulliez, enthusiast of American-style customer service ideas and founder of a chain of hypermarkets, admits that the French are inclined to interpret "service" as "subservience" or degrading oneself.[6] Service providers are known to be uncooperative, moody, and power-wielding.

Therefore, employees fearful of being treated like a servant use all the power they can muster to demand that the customer defer to them instead. This behavior is not curbed by management either. An American living in Paris for many years recounted a story which exemplified her finding that the French consider customers to be a nuisance at times. An employee was blocking the entrance to the store to hang a poster from the ceiling. After several minutes, a crowd of customers wanting to get in formed, but none said a word. Finally the American politely asked if the clerk could move aside long enough to let the customers by. He rudely stated that he was too busy. She then stammered, "But the customer!", to which the reply was, "The customer comes last here!"[7] Workers who interact with the customer are not reprimanded for putting the customer's needs or the quality of his encounter with the company last, so they have little incentive to alter their natural inclinations to treat the customer as insignificant.

As is illustrated by the event described above, the French are unaware of any rights the customer may have. It was the American-born customer who questioned the attitude of the rude employee, not one of the French customers who was also ignored and made to wait. Expressions and attitudes such as "The customer is always right" common in the United States do not exist in France and apparently the French customers do not harbor such notions of themselves as a company's valuable assets. Therefore, these attitudes have not had the effect of empowering French customers and raising their service expectations.

One cannot envision the nation of France embracing customer service principles which stipulate eager accommodation of the customer and utmost regard for his every plight. Customers in a position of paying for luxury, such as at world-class hotels, are granted that kind of service. But, in everyday situations at the grocery store, the post office, or government agencies, the customer is not accorded primary consideration.[8] For example, a trip to the post office can involve waiting in more than one line if the customer needs more than one service. If a customer accidentally stands in the wrong line, he will be expected to wait all over again in the correct line.[9] The customer is not granted special favors in any effort to win his continued patronage of that business.

The French view of competition also differs from the American view enough to possibly affect the practice of customer service in France. Providing good customer service is considered by most American firms to be a valid means to augment competitive advantage and profitability. But, traditionally, the French have not viewed business as a competitive arena and a drive to make money is looked down upon.[10] Although the importance of competition is increasing in France, the use of superior customer service to gain competitive advantage may be viewed as greedy and overly ambitious.[11] Americans may place more importance on competitiveness because they derive self-esteem and social status from their business successes. The French, on the other hand, do not depend on work for personal satisfaction and status. They are more interested in the quality of life, which decreases their dedication to work and increases their interest in leisure time and

vacations.[12] Competition is not a compelling reason for many French companies to incorporate ideas of customer service into the work place.

The deeply in-grained concept of honor in French culture may be another reason the customer service practices known in the United States have not evolved in France. Honor is a pervasive theme in French culture. Under this honor, a French businessman may feel that he does not have to resort to customer service gimmicks or boastful advertising to attract and retain customers, because his products or services are an extension of himself and therefore stand on their own merits.

Philippe d'Iribarne, who writes about the social and cultural roots of behavior and economic institutions, comments extensively on the role of honor in the French marketplace in *La logique de l'honneur*. He explains how deeply entrenched honor is in French culture, particularly pertaining to work: "The honor accorded work and the trades likens them to an art, complete with its own culture of proper conduct which places working above 'mere commerce.'" He points out that honorable work in France is seen as noble: "It's a matter of making one's work *noble*. 'The French Knighthood of Work,' a secret organization, charges itself with 'raising the dignity of work, declaring and demonstrating that only those who earn their way by the sweat of their brow may call themselves *noble*.' One would talk of the *aristocracy* of the worker, or...the *nobility* of vocation."[13] Work is thus exalted and a French person can demonstrate his honor through his work.

The roots of honor in France run very deep. The eighteenth-century writer and philosopher Montesquieu in *Les Lettres Persanes* (1721) supports the thought that republics are best suited to virtue, honor and reputation and uses France as an example of this belief. In the same work, Montesquieu notes that it is the virtue of each citizen which holds a complex society together and keeps it from falling prey to its own innate evil qualities.[14] Both in the past and presently, French society sees itself as intimately linked to honor.

The concept of honor in France is not only powerful, but also highly personal. Each internalizes his sense of honor. This highly individual nature of honor is highlighted by d'Iribarne in *La logique de l'honneur*. He cites Montesquieu who stated that in a society governed by honor, honor and virtue are individual. The virtues that one owes oneself are greater than those owed to others. Thus, according to the great writer, one's virtues distinguish the individual from his fellow citizens rather than draw him toward them. D'Iribarne adds that not fulfilling one's obligations according to one's station in life is to dishonor oneself, "to avoid such a degradation, one must be prepared to sacrifice his welfare, and sometimes his life." The author cites Montesquieu again: "the prince must never demand of us an action which will do us dishonor for we would then be unfit to serve him." D'Iribarne explains that one dishonors himself by asking another person to do something which he deems beneath himself.[15] Each person has his own demanding sense of honor he must uphold. One can see how the customer service practices such as apologizing for mistakes or using service as a tool to boost profits might be offensive to a

French businessman. Honor in French culture is extensive and affects that country's business practices.

A strong sense of personal honor in the French business place dictates that traditionally any arrogance is repudiated. The advertising popular in the United States seems boastful and exaggerated to the French who believe that the quality of a service or product should speak for itself. Customer service slogans and practices may strike the French as too competitive, a hard sell. Over-selling on a personal level has a history of ridicule in France. For example, in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) by the great French playwright Molière, the main character is an egoist who threatens the happiness of others through his attempts at social climbing. The biographer Walker comments on the situation, "Already in possession of as much happiness as money can buy, Jourdain yet feels compelled to strive for the achievement of a higher *gloire*, or personal standing, and as he works to clothe himself in the symbols of a higher status he aids society in keeping him at his proper level."[16] The character is expected to stay in his place and is not allowed by society to over exaggerate his qualities. Even the great nineteenth-century French novelist Honoré de Balzac is criticized by French society and biographer Pritchett for attempting to achieve a higher social status through expensive and pretentious clothing, accessories and personal objects.[17] Fancy packaging of the person to exaggerate the individual is not acceptable. Likewise, gimmicks to dress up a product or service are also considered to be in poor taste and many manifestations of customer service may be viewed as such gimmickry.

A French businessperson's sense of honor may interfere with his ability to offer the customer the same promises of service American businesspeople do. A French person's offering in the marketplace is a reflection of his personal honor. Therefore, the product or service should be examined and judged on its own qualifications; it does not require any additional "packaging" by the worker or merchant. D'Iribarne explains the traditional viewpoint which affects modern business morés: "The dignity of the worker is not determined solely by the extent of his knowledge, but also by his love of a job well done. The apprenticeship he undergoes is based in morality as well as technique."[18] One may conclude that the French customer assumes that he is being offered the best product or service its producer can provide, for it is backed by personal honor.

A conservative and inflexible atmosphere in French organizations may have also kept the French from centering actions and decisions on the customer. Focus on the customer in France is hampered by a lack of flexibility in French companies and employee apathy.[19] Businessmen and decision makers are rather conservative, which deters them from making changes or coming up with innovations for the sake of the customer. Flexibility is lost as upper management is too risk-averse.[20] Unmet consumer needs might even be seen as a source of inconvenience.[21] While some French firms are aware of the competitive advantage of good customer service, many are not willing to stray from tradition[22] and most will not expend the extra cost of providing additional services.[23] Employees are likewise not motivated to keep the customer's needs in mind. Due to emphasis on tradition and an autocratic management, employees are not inspired to come

up with service ideas to benefit the customer[24] and annual raises are not typically augmented with merit-based promotions or employee profit-sharing.[25] The relationship between performance and customer satisfaction is not perceived by the employee. One may conclude that traditional management in France might view a shift in emphasis to the customer as too risky.

By not concentrating on the customer, opportunities to bring potentially popular products to the market are sometimes lost. French firms and their engineers or designers are typically myopic about their products. They look to their own clever inspirations, rather than what the consumer might be lacking. Once conceived, an idea is developed into a product without significant consideration of its place in the market. A French executive explains it like this:

> They [the French] think that if they design the best, if it's technically or aesthetically brilliant, people will buy it. Most French people aren't good at marketing, at selling, because they don't care about it so much as about the process, the creation.[26]

Another Frenchman, an entrepreneur, explains that the French are attracted to that which is ingenious. They look for solutions that are elegant or brilliant, not sensible or efficient.[27] As a result of this profound interest in the idea of the product, the creative aspect of a project is more important than carrying it out. Profit is therefore not a driving force, but a nice by-product of a technically advanced or interesting product.[28] One would point out the creative process and innovation may lead to popular products praised in the marketplace, but a centering on the product rather than the customer's want also deprives

a firm of marketplace successes. The French are not always driven by a desire to fill the customer's needs in the most efficient manner possible.

It appears that the tenets of customer service would not be understood or accepted by the French due to differences in culture and tradition. What seems to be completely natural to one culture is contrived and overbearing to the other. However, as globalization continues, neither culture exists without the increasing exposure to new ways of looking at business. Left on their own, the French are "culturally resistant" to providing good customer service.[29] However, multicultural business exchanges between the French and Americans are increasing[30] and customer service concepts are being introduced to the French. With time and more open-minded generations, one expects that some of the principles of customer service may be absorbed by French business culture.

Introduction of customer service to France

It is unlikely that the French will ever collectively embrace the same customer service principles that Americans have. The culture and societal attitudes simply preclude that possibility.[31] The fervor with which Americans cling to the customer service ethic originates in American culture. However, its popular use in business is widely accepted and accompanies American firms in any new endeavors, including those involving business dealings with the French. Thus, the French have been introduced to American-style customer service.

The younger generation, with greater exposure to other cultures and the influences of international business, may be inadvertently preparing France for a greater acceptance of customer service concepts. For example, adolescents, teens and young families have begun to frequent traditional cafes less often and fast food establishments more frequently. The children are swayed by the advertising campaigns and an attraction to American culture (hence the popularity of McDonald's). The young adults and parents are lured by low prices, convenience, and cleanliness.[31] American and French managers alike are importing American business techniques and teaching their employees, for example, to smile at customers in an effort to give them friendly service.[33] Although not widespread, the American and Anglo-Saxon influences are present in France as tools of competition, which includes paying close attention to the customer's needs.[34]

As globalization of the market place continues, French industry is learning to play the customer service game. A five-page advertisement appeared in a prominent business publication in 1991 extolling the benefits awaiting American firms who choose France as the location for their European operations.[35] The Invest in France Agency explains to the American reader that the French are traditionally "obsessed" with quality and that they are driven to excel, producing the finest products. The agency utilized such customer-attracting terms as confidence, commitment to competition, and commitment to quality. The advertisement then highlights the "quality locations" available to firms in telecommunications, electronics, bio-technology, and data technology. The director of the Invest in France Agency was later cited in the news decrying the uncooperative nature of

the French government in attracting American firms.[36] It seems that the approval of their applications for installation in France are taking much too long. The director explained that the administration must look at American companies interested in French sites as customers, not mere taxpayers. The agency is well-versed in the American customer service ethic and may spread its understanding on to other organizations in France.

Globalization and increased competition will expose French business leaders and the French workforce to new ideas, different business cultures, and the will to try new techniques. The author of this paper has found that customer service principles from the United States have already made their way onto French soil and believes they will undoubtedly continue to do so. Joint ventures between France and the United States will set examples for other companies to consider, and possibly emulate.

American companies exporting customer service to France

Americans working in France for subsidiaries, multinational companies, or joint ventures may find themselves wondering how to share their ingrained notions of customer service with their new colleagues and employees. Because the preparation offered in the United States does not sufficiently explain what the international employee will encounter abroad, even the "prepared" American manager in France will encounter considerable culture shock in his new work environment.[37] One finds that comprehension of the French personality and a plan for sharing one's own business philosophy are needed for success. One American manager in France explained, "Imported management ideas can collide with

deeply programmed ways of thinking and behaving. Often there are no rights and wrongs, just differences."[38] Understanding and working within the context of those differences is the key. This section offers advice that the customer-oriented international employee bridging American and French business practices might follow on an assignment.

Whether an American manager finds himself in France representing an American firm at its subsidiary or working for a French firm which just acquired his home country employer, he will have to come to terms with his new work environment. An understanding of French business protocol is his first concern as he seeks to establish supportive relationships with his coworkers and staff members.

First and foremost, American managers on French soil must behave properly in their French employees' eyes. To the less-formal American this may seem unnecessary, but the French attach a lot of importance to proper comportment and will be offended and uncooperative if this aspect of his culture is breached by a superior. For example, one French secretary did not receive the requisite handshake and "Good morning, Colette" from her American boss. She reported feeling "insulted, and much less like helping him."[39] Managers seeking acceptance among their subordinates may actually lose their respect, for French bosses and personnel are not equals. Rather, the boss maintains an autocratic appearance even though the orders he gives may actually be from higher levels. An open, friendly management style may invoke suspicion or portray the manager as a pushover.[40] While trying to establish an atmosphere of cooperation with his French employees, the manager must not stray too far from the correct model of French

management. Change must be incremental, allowing employees to become accustomed to new views about working together and sharing ideas for the efficient running of the company and improved services or goods for the customer.

Standard business philosophies in the United States such as open communication to improve coworker relations are not the same in France. Varying points of view will perplex the American manager who does not grasp the underlying reasons for differing behavior. A manager may behave one way in order to elicit an expected response from his employee. The actual response may be disappointing and surprising. For example, joining in on projects and maintaining an open-door policy, both intended to encourage interaction with employees, may actually push them away.[41] Findings by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall were used to help explain the differing behaviors in the book *French or Foe?* His insight is very helpful when considered in the context of business. He found that Americans are achievement-oriented and are therefore accustomed to clear, direct communication and information exchanges among employees and between levels. Cooperation, team work, and mutual support assist Americans in their goal to get the job done and make money first, and build relationships later. The French are an affiliation culture; relationship-building comes before the big effort made for money-making. The French do not appreciate the American's attempt to spell out every detail. French employees maintain their own private networks of information and communication; they do not need extraneous explanations and may interpret them as condescending.[42] While working hard toward a goal of supportive service among

coworkers and their superiors, the American manager must keep both cultures' frames of reference in mind.

Motivation is also not universal. Standard incentives in the United States do not work well among French employees. For instance, a bonus offered as motivation for improved service and public acknowledgment of superior performance may produce a confused rather than an eager worker.[43] The bottom line or personal achievement do not motivate the French. Johnson suggests that the American manager put away his profuse compliments and bonuses and appeal to his employee's honor, individuality, and company identity: "Make [him] proud of the company with television spots or full page color ads in major newspapers" and a simple omission of criticism will be well-received as praise.[44] Difficult as it may be, the manager is advised to set aside capitalism as his first priority and let cultural sensitivity take the foreground. The French are more impressed by individuality and personal relationships than professional accomplishments.[45] One may presume then that customer service attitudes are better instilled through an appeal to the employee's humanity or creativity than a need to achieve higher profits.

Product managers may have difficulty seeing their employees meet deadlines. While missed due dates may clearly translate into angry customers in the United States, in France this is not the employee's concern. The strict hierarchy decreases an employee's sense of responsibility and the flexibility of time frames in France are notorious among Anglo-Saxons. It has been proposed that the American manager take a more active role in insuring that his subordinate's deadlines are met. Reminders and checking up on progress

are required.[46] One French executive commented on the relaxed product-to-market time frame: "We are not concerned with being the first with a product in the marketplace, but with being the best."[47] As for suppliers, motivating them to meet deadlines could require making several visits to see how they are doing, performing what Edward and Mildred Reed Hall call "on-the-scene stroking" to keep one's orders high-priority, and learning in advance if a delay is unavoidable.[48] These efforts, though time-consuming and costly, are an important part of business in France and essential to getting the customers' products to market on time.

An American executive who lands on French soil eager to share his customer-centered philosophies must be careful not to alienate his employees. Hogg and Mazur have made suggestions for "reculturing" an organization in order to gear everyone in it toward the customer. For example, in a writing for the Economic Intelligence Unit, they report that creating a lasting marketing culture involves:

> - Time. It can take from five to ten years of solid commitment.
>
> - Belief. The chief executive/chairman must believe in it, understand it, and want it. Without that, the effort is doomed to be short-term and superficial and will probably degenerate into a 'have a nice day' syndrome.
>
> - Planning. A carefully thought out plan has to be devised to convert everyone in the company, and anyone else with whom it has a relationship, to the understanding that they are all working for the customer.
>
> - Flexibility. Cultures appropriate to today's environment may be unsuitable or even deleterious in tomorrow's.[49]

While much of the advice is sound, an American following these hints too hastily will meet much opposition due to the wide cultural differences between the French and Americans. An overhaul of company or office morés is too startling and invasive. It is wise for the American manager to introduce his values without presenting them as the new incoming company culture, which may seem imposing and oppressive to the national employees. The "do-it-our-way" approach is too dogmatic and will not work with the French.[50] Acceptance of new ideas is more likely when the group feels like changes were made by consensus.[51] The authors of *Understanding Cultural Differences* remind the American that people are the most valuable asset and therefore he must first learn how to inspire them, motivate them, supply them with opportunities, and earn their trust. Only then, with their participation, will the organization prosper and the manager succeed.[52] A skillful American manager can successfully navigate the evolution from fearful, unresponsive employees to cooperative, contributing personnel. One manager carefully convinced his staff that he truly wanted them to take initiative, to challenge his ideas, and to take risks. After some time and patience, he reports, "My staff was brimming with ideas and suggestions. I couldn't handle them all. They seemed to enjoy our consensus building approach."[53] Introducing new ways of thinking about the focus of a company must be done with subtlety and tact. One cannot overstate the importance of cultural sensitivity.

A report by the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service in Paris tackled the issue of customer service and the French. The staff at the Paris office established that good customer service demands that a company's employees must be willing to make the

customer their highest priority. They then acknowledged that the extra efforts required for quality service do not come naturally to the French. Suggestions were made for service-oriented American firms trying to operate in the French market:

> - Emphasize the importance of service, and make it one of your company's central values. Carefully show your people how to deliver it.
>
> - Good service should be rewarded. Merit-based bonuses are becoming more common, and new tax regulations make profit sharing particularly attractive. In the same way, repeated incidence of bad service should be weeded out. Clear incentives are the only sure way to break the French of their non-service habits.
>
> - Bring a few key employees from the home office to help you successfully transplant your corporate culture and the American work ethic....the recent trend away from expatriates in favor of foreign nationals appears to be reversing.[54]

Implementing customer service notions by example, providing incentives for delivering good service, and enlisting the help of fellow American managers must be tempered by respect of the French culture. A genuine desire to learn and a generous dose of humility will go a long way toward convincing one's French hosts that their new American colleagues are considerate individuals with sincere intentions.[55]

Flexibility and cultural understanding among international employees makes the American manager's job in France easier. Naturally, people who do not have experience with other cultures' business techniques will take longer to comprehend and accept them. International employees with much multicultural experience combine the business philosophies of different cultures with more success and less stress than employees who have not previously had an international outlook.[56] While a global mindset among

employees facilitates intercultural business activities, it is essential to remark that those new to learning about foreign cultures can absorb and benefit from new ideas.

An article in *Business America* encourages its readers with the assertion that the French can learn customer service techniques and be quite good at them.[57] Exemplifying this claim was a witty story in the *Legal Times* which pondered the apparent transformation of the French owners of a genuine French restaurant in Washington D.C. Although the establishment is in the United States, it was an amusing example of the flexibility of internationals. The owners and staff, all French, surprised the writer with their mastery of customer service skills. He points out, "There is a remarkable 'we aim to please' sort of attitude that one simply does not associate with the French." Apologies for slightly stale bread and a notably service-oriented staff prompted the writer to recommend the restaurant to his readers on the merits of the "very approachable" French and their fine cuisine.[58] Experienced internationals are helpful, but not essential to installing a customer service ethic in Franco-American business endeavors.

There are many basic ways in which the French and Americans differ in their perception of business practices. Communication, collaboration, incentives, and deadlines are only a few. The American manager in France will face dozens of disorienting differences during his stay in France, especially while sincerely attempting to share his highly valued notions of service and customer focus. To cope with the dizzying culture-bound differences, Polly Platt, conductor of seminars for American executives in France, advises her clients to not take any bad experiences personally, not to judge, to understand

that French "genius for creating delights for the senses and the spirit, as well as major scientific inventions" is hidden deep within the person, to learn "special weapons" to uncover the employee's inner resources, and to keep one's confidence and sense of humor.[59] Altering one's perception, being exceedingly flexible, and widening one's frame of reference enables the American manager to learn the tools he needs to bring the customer service ethic he holds so dear to France, to the satisfaction of both countries' employees.

Specific solutions to customer service problems in France will vary as widely as the problems themselves and the individuals who are the service providers. After a successful introduction and transplant of American notions of customer service, the Americans and the French must work together, mustering all their creative forces, to find solutions that will satisfy members of both cultures. The Americans may feel pressed to offer customer service to increase market share or loyalty of customers and boost profits. The French may find this bottom-line mentality offensive and resist it. Customer service is best proposed in terms the French will appreciate. The French are proud, individualistic people with a great sense of honor and a preference for genuine behavior. The status-conscious, virtually immobile societal structure[60] may dictate that workers in the position of serving customers have low self-esteem and are defensive. This environment results in accepted surly attitudes and power plays.[61] When customer service values are instilled, the aspects of good service that are impressed upon the employees should stress the creativity involved, the individual touches that make it special, the pride in performing one's job

well, the honor in having the power to assist a fellow human being. By knowing the French personality and the situations in which good service will be delivered, one maintains that management can creatively and deftly teach employees to deliver good service on their own terms.

The author of this paper offers here three examples of possible solutions to customer service problems in France. Imagination and insight are important parts of the manager's mindset when designing solutions to problems. As the anthropologist Raymonde Carroll pointed out, the French prefer to turn to another person for information rather than consult a map or directory. Information desks are often crowded in spite of the fact that the service provided is inadequate and the customers are not entirely confident in the answers they receive.[62] To introduce a bit of superior customer service on French terms, a manager whose duties include information desks could increase the number of agents to relieve the long lines and hire or train staff to deliver useful information the customers could trust. A French customer used to the usual busy desks and abusive treatment would be relieved to find such service. Personnel in charge of directing phone calls are known to be curt, interrogating, and hurried.[63] This causes them to occasionally give wrong information or offend callers.[64] Employees who answer phones could have their job descriptions revised to make them feel more like public relations or marketing associates than lowly receptionists. They could be taught the importance of making a good impression and professionally imparting their knowledge of their boss' schedule or their shop's stock to the clients. To relieve time pressures and a

hurried tone, permission could be granted to the employee to take the time necessary to adequately handle calls and answer inquiries. Back-up assistance would then be provided during peak hours. Customers would remember the shop or business they telephoned and actually received polite treatment and correct information. Foreigners in France, especially Paris, are often affronted by the service they receive as tourists or newcomers. Front-line employees in all posts could be encouraged to show more compassion for the non-French-speaking, stumbling foreigners by appealing to their humanitarian side.[65] The French can be very helpful to those in need;[66] they prefer to naturally assist someone in need, not because they are told to. The key is to motivate them to be understanding, not because their job demands it, but because they are upright citizens who comprehend why a nervous or anxious visitor would be compelled to come to the magnificent City of Lights or wondrous France without even knowing how to get around or speak French. France's reputation as the most cultured, correct country in the world is at stake! A proud Frenchman will want to ensure that his honorable homeland is adequately portrayed. Customers from foreign lands for the short- or long-term will keep the establishment with the outstandingly nice employees in mind. These examples illustrate the kind of keen perception of French character and imagination a manager needs to help his French employees to provide the kind of good service that stands out in customers' minds and makes them return.

The French have been described as culturally resistant to providing customer service.[67] However, pessimistic statements such as this one are made in the American

frame of reference. True, the French are not inclined to espousing the customer service concepts that are so widely accepted in the United States. A similar customer service ethic has not evolved in France. Notions of good service are appearing in France due to the presence of American subsidiaries, French acquisitions of American companies, multinational corporations,[68] and an importation of management techniques.[69] Once presented in a way that is palatable to French citizens, there is much promise for improved customer relations in that country. The foreign business presence in France has confidence in its ability to impart some of its customer service wisdom upon the French.

CHAPTER 5

FRANCE'S OWN BRAND OF SERVICE

While many Americans cling to "customer service" as a means of improving the experiences of a consumer-oriented society, the French have their own methods of trying to improve their quality of life which affect the customer. Considering that the notions of customer service are so basic to Americans and that the French do not have a similar customer service ethic, one wonders how the French consumer can bear his business interactions. To understand how people in France find enjoyment as customers, one must consider the French lifestyle overall. While the French do not have detailed rules about how customers are to be properly treated, they do run both their personal and business lives the way they like them. Perhaps not recognizable to Americans, little significant touches of genuine service exist in many forms in France. The French benefit from their own culturally specific system of improving daily living and making life more enjoyable. Some call it *joie de vivre*, others consider it the natural result of the French character. In either case, the French have their ways of spoiling or catering to each other to improve the life experience just like Americans believe customer service should improve the experiences of the consumer. To get a glimpse of the lighter side of the French consumer's experiences, this chapter reveals France's unique perspective which results in satisfactory encounters for its native customers.

While the French may have a reputation of being grumpy, arrogant, or rude, they are also admired for being a people who know how to live and live *well*. Writers cannot

resist mentioning the impressive French *joie de vivre* and wonderful quality of life. Compliments in print abound. Johnson and Duijker exclaim, "France is the country that has perfected the art of living....She sets herself the highest standards. You can find perfectly baked bread in every village."[1] Chelminski offers his opinion that "history and accident and geography [in France] have magically conspired over the centuries with climate and a natural Gallic penchant for revelry...to create a situation that remains unique even today, in spite of the fact that enormous armies of born-again *bon vivants* in every corner of the western world are doing their damnest to get into the act."[2] Author Taylor confirms, "The French aren't really so dour. They invented the phrase, *joie de vivre*, which even in English means the joy of living life."[3] As quoted in *French or Foe?*, a *Travel and Leisure* writer summed up the essence of the source of France's own brand of service when he commented on the difference between Americans and French:

> [Americans] speak with an air of detachment, even distrust, of the pursuit of happiness. The French just go ahead with it - and they've organized a country and a great city to make sure they catch what they're chasing....What I mean is that the French have developed the arts of leisure to a higher degree than we have. Eating, drinking, gossiping, just enjoying - the French do it with unique style....A Frenchman is more locked in by where he was born, what his father did, how he speaks the language. But, God, the French know how to live.[4]

Apparently, many have found that the French have their own way of making life more enjoyable. The result of centuries of practice, this system works very well for the French and has even earned them the enviable reputation reflected in the quotes above.

In French society one finds that there are some pleasantries afforded the customer which are basically forms of good customer service. Without prompting by customer

service manuals or a service-oriented manager, little "services" occur all the time. A few examples are the sliding of a good recipe from one side of the fisherman's stall to the customer, the patient explanation of an appliance's usages, or nutritional information offered free of charge to young mothers.[5] The comforting, familiar chit-chat of a favorite merchant, the granted request to have the deposit of a check postponed,[6] one's favorite but hard-to-find vegetables set aside for pick up--these are all forms of good service French customers enjoy regularly. Travelers can even depend on warm and hospitable service providers. Small, family-run hotels are a comfort to out-of-towners. Managers might recruit their entire local clientele to offer a guest good directions to his next attraction. The families are always helpful, knowledgeable about their community and keep a protective eye on the front door for their guests' safety.[7] These small but important niceties mean a lot to the French who feel that these efforts make life more enjoyable and worth living.

The lesser emphasis on capitalism in France that one might expect in a mixed economy affords the French and their customers more genuine, sincere ambitions for service. For example, the centuries-old chateaux and manors in France welcoming overnight guests are not mere money-making enterprises. The grand bed-and-breakfasts are privately owned and operated by families who want to preserve the estates and who value their great histories.[8] Families open their homes, offering the customer a castle-like experience complete with professional service, simply to meet interesting people, to fund the preservation of their establishments, or to share their histories with an appreciative

public.[9] Another example is France's network of hiking trails. The Grande Randonnee is an extensive network of long-distance footpaths which are well-marked and well-maintained for their users' enjoyment. The trails are well-organized so that hikers may stay in a different town each night. Excellent guidebooks are also published by a hiking association to facilitate the use of the system and increase the hiker's appreciation of the passing scenery.[10] These are services offered by a generous people for the satisfaction of travelers wishing to experience France, which its inhabitants take great pride in. The French provide service in some instances without thinking about it. It is often second-nature for the French to consider their compatriots. Even shopping for food can be a special experience in France. While typical supermarkets do exist in France, the cherished open air market is a tradition that is, in the words of Taylor, "kept alive...by the vitality of both the products and the people who sell them."[11] The author of *The French at Table* describes the charismatic people at the outdoor markets: "These market food-hawkers are a very special race, both the men and the women: hangovers from the Middle Ages who mix commerce, theatre and social commentary in an ongoing chatter that is designed as much to amuse and entertain as to sell."[12] Going to market in France and experiencing these sellers and their offerings is considered a luxury for Americans who were raised in the land of the supermarket and shopping mall.[13] Merchants who do not allow their customers to handle their wares may be an annoyance to those from the United States. Rather, the sellers are not so much touchy about their produce or other products as they are proud. This pride, in addition to what they deem superior knowledge of the product,

means that the merchant is trusted to honorably make the best selection for his patrons. For many, a Frenchman's ability to find joy in the simple task of buying groceries is an example of the spirit that makes life so agreeable to the French.

The impact of this French character on the business world is also observable. One impressive aspect of French business philosophy is the long-term relationships business people build with their customers, associates and partners. Instances of older companies serving the same customers for generations are more common than in the United States and are also accorded more value socially. Successful salespeople in France are very good with people; they form solid relationships with their customers that last for many years. A good salesperson knows his customer's families, hobbies and outside interests, as well as his business needs and preferences.[14] Business associates and partners enjoy the slow-paced relationship building that is the hallmark of French business. Meetings and discussions are very flexible, and all opinions are given a chance to be expressed. While it may seem that the group jumps excitedly from topic to topic without wrapping up any particular issue, compromise and consensus prevail in the end. Although the animated debate is out of the American's comfort zone, the heated discussion was merely a way to consider all the options and find solutions. When colleagues or partners dine, business talk is saved for the dessert course so that getting to know one another, which is essential to the French, is given first priority.[15] An American just getting used to the slower pace of business in France expressed his appreciation of it: "It's pretty nice, all that time off. And not being stressed about being late. It all gets done, somehow, and done well. Maybe,

you know, their lives are more - well, meaningful than ours."[16] One must concede that, granted, most Americans would not trade their own cultures for French lifestyle, but there are many who can appreciate how the French have chosen to live.

In the work place, American international employees are shocked by French hypercriticism and aggression. But, these traits actually serve a useful purpose to the French personality. Explosions in temper reflect temporary moods and allow the volatile employee an alternative to emotional overload, enabling him to return calmly to productive work. Johnson maintains that the Latin temperament serves the office place in this manner while the self-contained, reticent and probably repressed northerner suffers from his undisclosed inner anxieties.[17] In France, underlying conflicts and issues make their way to the surface and get worked out and nobody is offended by the display of emotion involved. Although unacceptable in the United States, the Latin-based release of tension results in an improvement of the work atmosphere in France.

Globalization and contact with new business practices through international business call for new service standards in France. The French on their own, however, have their own ways of obtaining actual service from workers in a position to assist customers. Astute French customers have a trick up their sleeves for getting extra service when they really need it. By using the formula of politeness "*Excusez-moi de vous déranger, mais...*", or "Pardon me for bothering you, but...," the customer has shown that he has manners and is thus less suspicious. Usually the service provider is then quite accommodating and helpful. By demonstrating a state of helplessness and adding "*J'ai un*

problème," or "I have a problem," a clerk or agent may spend half the morning trying to fill the customer's unique need.[18] These recognized expressions are an extension of the charming, relationship-building, and seducing of service workers that already takes place everyday for French citizens to get decent service. Politeness and a captivating personality are two important ways in France of showing that one is well-raised and therefore worth the service worker's time and effort. What may seem like unnecessary game playing to an American is correct protocol for the French. When both sides participate in the rituals, the service interactions run more smoothly.

Even in crowded, big city Paris, the visitors and inhabitants are both aware and appreciative of the nature of French citizens which usually gives the impression of being polished or refined. Even in one of the most popular late-night spots in town, the Latin Quarter, one reporter observes, "Everyone is civil; nobody shouts, swears or staggers."[19] Another journalist offers his opinion to his readers that Parisians and their guests are not victims of urban blight as in many metropolitan areas, but rather the spectators and participants of art throughout the city--in the public spaces, the shop windows, and the locals' dress, for example.[20] Another touch of service can be found in asking for help on the street. Strangers can be counted on to give directions when asked or assist the lost person in finding reliable directions. The reply to a request for help will never be "I don't know," or "I'm in a hurry." A French person feels it is his duty to help the wayward stranger find his way.[21] Platt maintains that "Parisians are endlessly understanding": incidents of sympathetic strangers abound. The author experienced strangers helping her

by taking care of her car keys lost in the street, adjusting and re-attaching an unwieldy bundle to her bike rack with their own string, spending 20 minutes separating a tangled bungee cord from the axle of her bicycle and having her car fixed at a shop free of charge.[22] These are courteous acts one does not associate with a metropolitan city. The administration also feels responsible for helping Paris retain its brilliance. A considerable amount of money has been allotted by the mayor to the sanitation department which collects city garbage every day (even on Sundays), cleans city gutters, and cleans up the sidewalk after Parisians' pets have been for a stroll.[23] The over populated, big cities even receive the attention given to little details that make life seem better. One could imagine the favorable impact in the marketplace if the thoughtful and generous behavior of private individuals could be routinely offered to customers by employees.

While the quality the French attach to their lifestyles may be enviable to many people, some of it is governed by rules or codes of behavior that are too restrictive for the casual, outgoing American. For example, French homemakers are required by their culture to chat with local merchants, show courtesy via a polite conversation with other school parents, and honor neighbors' privacy by not being too friendly. A simple "hi" in the store or the street when shopping or picking up children from school will not do, even if one is pressed for time. Looking into a neighbor's yard and waving "hello" is improper, even when next-door residents have lived side by side for years. A lonely customer new to a cafe or shop may not strike up conversation with the employees, owners, or other customers. Only regular customers may converse with service providers.[24] Americans

may find these rules of proper behavior too formal or confining, but they facilitate living for the French. Following codes of well-mannered comportment improves the quality of life in France for its inhabitants find enjoyment in exhibiting behavior that indicates refinement and having been raised well. A professional and knowledgeable, albeit slightly patronizing, waiter is preferable to the inexperienced, bouncy teen-aged waitperson who sports a glued-on smile and offers insincere enthusiasm, an approach which is common in the United States.[25] From the French point of view, the highly-defined rules do not inhibit good service, but *enhance* it.

France's own brand of customer service is embodied in an attitude about life that enriches the Frenchman and woman's existence. Over the years, this outlook has caught the attention of many and has sometimes even been a source of envy. One anticipates that this look into how the French add touches of service to their own lives will increase the American's understanding of a people with whom many will rub shoulders in the name of international business. The illuminations on France's own unique forms of service may not reflect how most Americans' choose to live, but any increased knowledge of the French system is an advantage in the Franco-American business community.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Customer Service Imperfections

A discussion and examination of the great extent to which Americans adhere to notions of customer service is incomplete without a look at its flaws. Although the customer service ethic in the United States is very strong and acknowledged by most every organization, its ideals are not uniformly met. In many instances, consumers do not receive the service they expect, nor do companies always deliver the service they believe in. Reasons vary from misguided attempts at implementing a firm's service ethic to hypocritical management espousing ideals it will not conform to. Even in the United States, where customer service pervades every aspect of business and much talk and study have been devoted to it, organizations do not always manage to put the customer first and consumers do not always get the consideration they are waiting for.

A common complaint about customer service in the United States is that, while everybody is embracing it, only a few seem to be delivering it. One sardonic service buff wrote in his book encouraging consumers to demand the service they've been promised, "'Service' is the hottest subject in business right now, but most of the service is *lip service* [italics mine], not 'customer service.'"[1] Amidst all the discussions about and claims of commitments to superior customer service, actual excellence in customer service is still an exception rather than the norm.[2] Some celebrated companies which are famous for their exceptional service are Nordstrom, Federal Express, Disney, Stew Leonard's, L. L. Bean,

and Lands' End.[3] Their dependable high service standards have raised these companies to paragons of service in the minds of many consumers. One finds that customer service "lip service" is prevalent, but actual consistent service meeting customers' expectations and organizations' claims is harder to find.

All over the United States, business people and consumers know and talk about customer service, but not everybody participates in it. Although customers are becoming more demanding of the quality of goods and services, not all the organizations in the country are taking strides to meet their demands.[4] Oftentimes management is guilty of wearing blinders. The people who run companies and make decisions which affect customers are themselves customers in their day-to-day lives. Yet, while in their business suits, the customer becomes "them," separate from the managerial "us." Donnelly complains that managers avoid taking the simple advice "Just do for the customer what [you] want done when [you] are the customer."[5] The managerial "us" may initiate a token complaint-handling system to measure customer satisfaction, while remaining ignorant of the fact that most slighted customers do not complain; they simply suffer in silence or take their business elsewhere. This is a poor attempt at managing customers' satisfaction.[6] One businessman marveled that people could so blatantly ignore customer service which he believed to be the basis of their profitability.[7] Managers may shy away from truly addressing the customer satisfaction issue out of fear or ignorance.

Unfortunately, believing in the "customer-driven" approach is not enough to have organizations delivering it.[8] For example, belief in a commitment to customer service by

the owners of a business or the CEO may not be manifest in the behavior of the front-line employees of that company. Retail clerks, salespeople, all kinds of service workers have given the impression that the customer is suspect, that he may be trying to "rip off" the company by returning an item or complaining about a defect.[9] Even throwing money at the customer service effort does not help companies to project and act on an image of excellence. Companies spend a lot of money correcting errors, fixing defects, and answering complaints about service. Likewise, large amounts of funds are spent on training employees. Yet, often the result is still ignorant, uncaring workers.[10] Decision-makers may be guilty of looking at "reculturation" toward a customer focus as a quick fix. If simple, clear messages are not demonstrated to every level of the company about a new emphasis on the customer, either some personnel will not be reached, or employees will become cynical. When actions by upper management do not match espoused ideals, employees suspect superficiality on management's behalf, "The chairman has read another book."[11] The thoughts of those in authority at an organization are not easily passed on to others.

It is possible that a company virtually ignore the trend toward customer commitment in the United States. While most companies are wise enough to espouse customer service ideals publicly, Cottle has found that some harbor utterly backward beliefs about customers which border on contempt. He enumerates that some of these beliefs involve talking about customers in disparaging terms, viewing customer-contact personnel as second-rate employees, not deeming such issues as telephone courtesy

worthy of serious training, and believing that technical superiority is all that matters.[12] Regarding the issue of telephone manners, many companies still overlook the importance of a good first impression. They inadequately man their phones with overworked, underpaid people who are probably rushed, brusque, and unhelpful. A customer relationship begun over the telephone is thus off to a bad start.[13] Focusing on the technical details leads some companies to hire "just anybody" to do technical jobs such as repair technician. While some technical skills can be mastered by most anyone, being able to deliver the high standards dictated by America's service ethic is something else. It requires hiring people who have already exhibited a strong service ethic or can readily be trained to.[14] While most organizations are aware of the customer service ethic, not all believe that they must conform to it.

The future of America's customer service ethic is unknown. While the power of the consumer has grown since the onset of the consumerist movement in the 1960s, it remains to be seen whether companies will be able to meet the standards they have set for themselves. Considering the great emphasis on customer service, there are relatively few organizations who really excel at it. Dozens of business leaders and writers claim that superior customer service is the wave of the future and the only means of procuring a significant competitive advantage for American industry entering the global arena. Doubts persist, given America's actual service record thus far. Albrecht decries American business' tradition of concentrating on the advertising and promotion of a product, while its Japanese competitors precociously focused on quality. He fears that America's

inability to commit itself to "perpetually improving the customer's total experience" will lead to further competitive disadvantages as compared to its rival Japan.[15] The writer of this papers feels that it will be interesting to see whether the role of customer service will turn out to have as much importance in the global arena as some businesspeople and writers proclaim.

Because customer service is such an integral part of American business and its ideals so strongly held by citizens of the United States, it appears that the customer service ethic will remain a part of the American character for some time. It is not clear whether American industry will be able to use this ethic to its advantage to compete and prevail in the international business arena. One may conclude that, since customers are longing to see proof of the service ideas espoused by business and organizations long to be competitive and profitable, one thing is certain: there is no shortage of business leaders and consumers who would like to see the ideals of their country's service ethic realized.

Lessons Learned

As this paper draws to a close, it is a good idea to consider what lessons this study has offered. Certainly, Americans and French can learn and benefit from each other's unique business practices. Differing viewpoints about customer service and to what degree an organization should focus on the customer surely complicate Franco-American business practices. However, amid the cultural surprises and disappointments, the betterment of two nations' business philosophies stands to prevail.

Americans pursuing business in France know that the French prefer a "soft sell" approach.[16] Business is not the fast-paced, high pressure world that it is in the United States. While no American firm would likely see any benefit in slowing its pace, some attributes of the calmer business environment of France could complement standard American business philosophies. For example, the trust and relationship building common in French business transactions could improve a company's associations with its suppliers and customers.[17] The sincerity in the relationship and the shared history with long-time customers promote both customer loyalty and an honorable image that cannot be bought on Madison Avenue. High-profile promotions and the hard sell are rejected by the French who believe that the product quality speaks for itself. The softer approach to business associates and customers could strengthen relationships, trust, and loyalty and add sincerity.

Regarding the impact on customer service, a softer, more genuine approach could be learned from the French. While the French have shown that their warmth is not bestowed upon customers equally,[18] those with whom they do show their amicable side are deeply touched. The customers who have taken the time to build relationships with their service providers greatly value those familiar connections.[19] Customer service in the United States could stand to be more genuine and personal. In their haste to make a profit from good customer service, companies have forced training on their employees that results in superficial requirements about greeting every customer and smiling a lot.[20] Platt credits the French with not offering the "fake commercial smile and overly cheerful 'have a

nice day' superficiality" known in the United States.[21] American customers can be assured of "satisfaction guaranteed," a no-hassle return policy, or sales clerks who call them by their first names. These policies improve a company's service record on paper, but they do not touch the customer personally as some of the more intimate, human interactions have touched French customers.[22] The French are more individualistic in their approach to customers. While this individualism accounts for some of the power games and rude treatment common in France, it also allows the employee the room to react personally, not under the constraints of some formula his boss has spelled out for him. In the context of American-style customer service, this individualism could empower employees to extend a personal, unique experience to each customer. Instead of training employees to react to customers uniformly according to some procedural manuscript, they could be encouraged to be polite, courteous, and helpful in the individual ways their own unique personalities allow. For example, rules posted in the stock room telling clerks to check on customers in the fitting rooms once every four minutes do not improve the customer's experience. Perhaps the shopper knows exactly what he wants and does not need an intrusive clerk checking up on him every few minutes. The clerk should be entrusted to determine to what extent his customers need attention, and in what form. A formal, stoic customer might not appreciate being called by the first name the person at the cash register has eyed on the customer's check or credit card. A policy of using first names to get personal with a customer is rigid and may be inappropriate for some customers, some establishments, or certain employees. The firm would benefit from a policy of fostering the individual

strengths of each employee and empowering him to do what is best for each unique interaction.

The area in which the French could most learn from Americans is within organizational walls. Rigid hierarchy and the resulting employee apathy and power games cost the company some efficiency and response to customer needs. A structure which forces employees to withdrawal to their own specific duties[23] and withhold observations or suggestions hurts the company.[24] Those who work directly with or close to customers get pertinent feedback about products and services. Essential information regarding the success or failure in the marketplace of a company's output may not reach the appropriate decision-making levels.[25] Due to societal structure and tradition,[26] the French will not take on the decentralized, problem-solving focus that American firms have, but an increase in employee initiative and cooperation could benefit the customer. Although superiors are traditionally autocratic and therefore not collaborating with their subordinates, a system of fostering employee initiative would allow the company to tap the valuable reserves of its workers' first-hand knowledge of the market. Greater cooperation and team work among departments and a consideration of employee observations and suggestions would enable the higher levels to make better informed decisions about its products or services. The customer and the organization both stand to benefit from freer communication in French businesses.

Finally, one must consider the lessons to be learned as American and French companies come together to accomplish business objectives in the global marketplace.

Through the disorientation and confusion of unexpected differences in philosophies, traditions and points of view,[27] growth awaits the members of both cultures. While American and French management and culture differ widely, both have had successes. Platt points out that "there are at least two different management 'roads to Rome' (and to making profits) [which] is proven by the global success of French multinationals" such as Elf Aquitaine, Rhône-Poulenc, Saint Gobain and Total.[28] Even without stressing customer service, these successful companies have made names for themselves. Understanding and learning from both of these "management roads to Rome" holds great rewards for the international manager and his company. One American working abroad for the first time in France eventually learned to be a "flexible, non-judgmental international," aware of several ways to look at problems, think and react. His new-found versatility gave him a sense of accomplishment and an exhilaration that showed in his work.[29] Another international executive explains how complementary the two cultures can be when managed properly. French methods of painstaking, thorough analysis and American "profit-run, time-to-market" haste work well together when each side shows flexibility and compromise. He feels that a company which could harness the strengths of the two styles could hold the market in its hand.[30] The author of *Culture Shock!* points out the strengths of marrying the two cultures' approaches to business. It is as if the company born of a joint venture is fighting in the international arena with not one, but two weapons. In one hand is the American sword of aggression and competition. In the other hand is the French strategy of gentleness, indirectness and commitment to relationships.[31] The

successful approaches of both nations work together to the benefit of the multinational company. Notions of customer service and treatment of the customer differ greatly in France and the United States. These differences add to the difficulties faced by French and Americans who come together in the marketplace or through joint ventures. However, by understanding the two cultures and learning from one another, improvements in customer service and greater international business strength could result.

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